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The Lifting
of the Shadow.

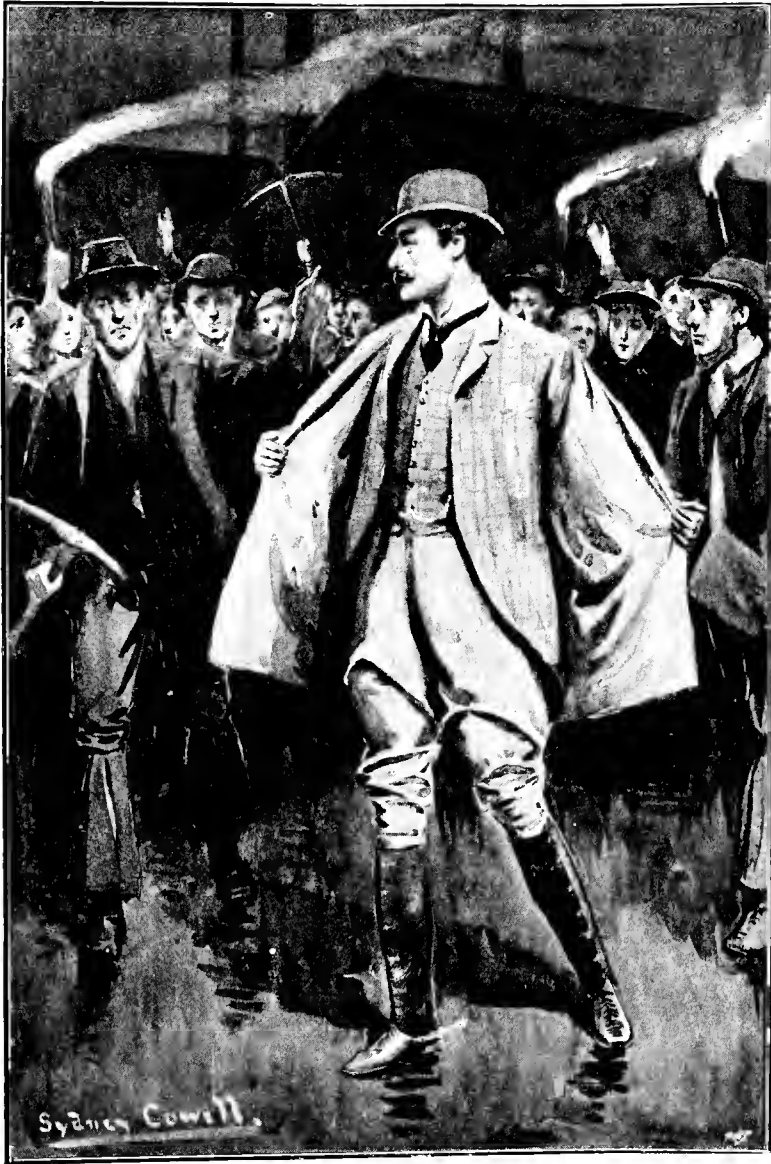


BY

K. M. EADY



LONDON:
57 & 59, Ludgate Hill, E.C.



"WHEN HE CALLED FOR VOLUNTEERS HE WAS ASTONISHED AT THE NUMBER WHO PRESSED FORWARD."—Page 149.

THE
LIFTING OF THE SHADOW

BY

K. M. EADY,

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY SYDNEY COWELL.



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“ WHEN HE CALLED FOR VOLUNTEERS HE WAS
ASTONISHED AT THE NUMBER WHO PRESSED
FORWARD ” *Frontispiece*

“ IT WAS A DESPERATE UNDERTAKING TO DESCEND
THAT WALL OF CRUMBLING STONE ” *Facing page 80*

“ ‘ WILL YOU GIVE ME MY ANSWER ANOTHER
TIME ? ’ HE SAID ” *Facing page 144*



THE LIFTING OF THE SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

AT SCHOOL.

AN English garden in all the beauty of early summer, a shady lawn where the sunlight only fell in little flickering patches of golden light, a vision of bright young figures flitting merrily across the grass, the sound of happy girlish laughter—this was what broke on the ears and sight of Keith Thorold as he followed Miss Ludlow in search of his sister.

It seemed a pity to spoil this merry scene, to bring the harsh discord of sorrow into the harmony, but the tidings that he bore admitted of no delay, and he advanced resolutely and gravely

“Thekla!”

A dainty little figure, the brightest and noisiest of the

throng, turned round at his call. She was a dark-haired, brown-eyed damsel of some seventeen years, whose cheeks glowed with soft, subdued rose colour, while eyes and lips quivered with mirth. She stood for a moment, pushing back some rebellious threads of hair from her face, before springing forward with a glad cry of welcome.

“Keith! dear old Keith! when did you come home? Oh! I am so glad to see you.”

But there was no answering cheerfulness in her brother's greeting. Miss Ludlow had commenced a protest against the boisterous mirth of her pupils, a reproach in which Thekla was included, but the girl glanced quickly at her brother's face, and realised suddenly that his gravity was not due to disapproval of her amusement, reading in his sombre face and cold words indications of coming trouble.

“Keith, what is it?” she cried, interrupting the schoolmistress with scanty ceremony “Tell me—some one is ill?”

“Yes, dear,” he answered gently, leading her away from the others, and putting his arm affectionately around her. “Your mother has had an accident, Thekla. Mazeppa threw her in the park yesterday, and——”

She clutched his arm, her face grey, her eyes dilated with terror. “She is not——”

“She is alive, my dear child,” answering the thought which she dared not express in words, while his stern young face grew kindly and tender. “You must come to her at once.”

“Mother—oh, mother!” the girl cried brokenly, and she leant against him with a mute but piteous appeal for comfort.

“My poor little girl.”

“If it happened yesterday, Keith,” she said presently in a sort of dazed bewilderment, “why didn’t they send for me then? Some one might have telegraphed——”

“I don’t know, dear. I suppose no one thought of it.” There was a touch of bitterness in his voice which did not escape her ear. “I was not sent for, and only returned this morning by chance. She was unconscious then, but she knew me an hour afterwards, and asked me to come for you at once. She seemed to think——” with a kind of hesitation in his voice—“that I might be some—comfort—might be able to help you a little.”

“It was like *her* to think of that,” Thekla began, and then a rush of tears prevented any further speech. In the remembrance of her mother’s loving thoughtfulness had come realisation of the extent of this overwhelming sorrow

Her brother watched her for some time in troubled silence. He was very young—only twenty-three—and while grieving deeply for the gentle stepmother, who had made his father’s house a home to him, and had been his kindest, truest friend in many a boyish scrape, he had no idea how to treat his little sister now. He could not understand that his mere presence, and the pressure of his kindly arms were in themselves a source of comfort to her, and was thankful when the striking of a clock supplied him with an inspiration.

"Listen, dear," he said firmly. "You must not give way, for we have to leave here in a quarter of an hour. Can you go now and get your things ready?"

With an effort she checked her sobs, and turned obediently towards the house; but as the little drooping figure moved slowly away, he was struck with her appearance of loneliness, and followed her swiftly, laying his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Shall I ask Miss Ludlow to come to you, Thekla?"

She shivered slightly. "No, no — not Miss Ludlow!" The name recalled the late scene in the garden, and the incongruity of her merry, noisy play with the thought of her injured mother jarred on the girl's sensitive mind. "Oh, Keith!" she cried, with a little wail like the moan of a hurt child. "How could I laugh and play—like that—when *she* was in pain? Oh! why did I not know?"

"That is folly, Thekla," he said, almost sharply. "Of course you could not know. Shall I not send any one to you?"

"No—yes. Send Stella Wincanton, please. You will tell her—about it, Keith?" imploringly "And then she won't ask me questions."

He promised, and walked back with quick, firm steps to the lawn. Young though he was, he already had great power of self-command and restraint, and nothing but the sadness of his dark eyes and the deep dent between the brows could have told a casual observer how greatly he was suffering. He came quietly towards Miss Ludlow; disturbing the lecture on lady-like deport-

ment which she was still inflicting on her little flock of penitents.

She started guiltily. In the overwhelming misfortune of having discovered her pupils disporting themselves in so unseemly a manner, and that too in the presence of a stranger, she had almost forgotten Thekla's trouble. "You have told her, Mr. Thorold? Poor child!" she murmured, with more kindness in tone and expression than Keith had given her credit for. "Where is she?"

"I have sent her to get ready; we must catch the next train for London."

"I will go to her——"

"No, no," hastily "I beg your pardon," noting a shadow of offence on the stiff features. "She is much overcome, and only asked for a schoolfellow, I believe—Miss Stella Wincanton. Would you tell me, please, where she is?"

One of the little group of pupils, a girl perhaps a year older than Thekla, lifted a bright face crowned with a mass of soft, golden hair, and looked frankly at him with eyes of darkest blue—eyes so true and fearless that they gave character to the young face. "I am Stella Wincanton."

He looked at her in surprise. "Not a sympathetic face," he thought. "Why should Thekla want her? And yet—" as on watching his countenance a curious change passed over her own—"perhaps I am misjudging her."

"Is Thekla in trouble—real trouble, I mean? Not

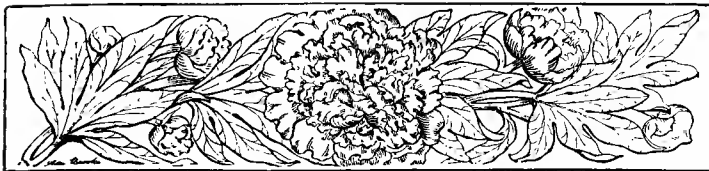
hide-and-seek," with a fine scorn of the reproof to which the others had been listening so meekly. "Ah!" as he made a sign of assent. "May I go to her?"

"She wants you," he answered briefly. "But stop a moment, please," as she moved impulsively away. "Thekla wished me first to tell you that her mother is—is dying, and to beg you not to ask her any questions."

"As if I should!" she flashed out indignantly, her eyes dimmed with a sudden moisture. "As if I did not know!" she added to herself, with a little sob. "You may be very big and strong, Mr. Thorold," she went on, mentally apostrophising the unconscious Keith, "yes, and good-looking too, and perhaps if I were your sister I should appeal to you to fight all my dragons, but I wouldn't come to you for love or sympathy."

Wherein perhaps she misjudged him too.





CHAPTER II.

THE DOCTOR'S HOUSEHOLD.



IT was all over. Sir Alexander Thorold's gentle little Russian wife had been laid in her grave in a London cemetery, and those whom she had loved—husband, daughter, and stepson—returned to the desolate house to realise, perhaps for the first time, how prominent a place she had filled in their lives.

There were no relatives or friends to distract their thoughts from their own sorrow. The usual crowd of flowers, anchors, crosses, and wreaths had come from all parts—from Sir Alexander's patients and medical associates, from the bevy of fashionable folk who had been wont to attend Lady Thorold's "days," from the tenants of the little place in Scotland that had been the cradle of the Thorold family—but the only relation asked to attend the funeral was Sir Alexander's young cousin, Kenneth Thorold, the head of the family, and he was travelling abroad, where presumably no tele-

gram had yet reached him. Among the hundreds of acquaintances in England and elsewhere, there was none who had broken through the barrier of Sir Alexander's pride and his wife's shyness so far as to be welcomed as a friend in time of trouble.

Most people described Sir Alexander as a very successful man. The younger son of a Scottish laird of small possessions and influence, he owed to his own talents the position he had secured as one of the leading physicians in England. A man of less merit and more geniality might have become more popular, but could not have commanded more respect; and yet, in spite of position, skill, undeviating honesty, a good old name, and a handsome presence, Sir Alexander Thorold had never made a friend. Although perhaps he scarcely knew it, the most astonishing success of his life had been winning the love of gentle, beautiful Olga Zariskoff, and retaining it until the end of her life. It had been a notable love, almost adoration, and only she had known that it was returned with a warmth of which no other person would have believed him capable. When she went from him he knew that the best part of his life was gone, but his pride prevented his showing grief by word or sign to any living person.

His son knew him little better than the outer world, but his instinct was very keen, and as he entered the darkened drawing-room, and flung himself down in his favourite seat near his stepmother's chair and work-table, he recalled the actions of the remaining members

of the family on their return from the funeral, and felt how significant they were of the position so quietly and unobtrusively held by the one they had lost. They were all units in the house now—the connecting link was broken. Sir Alexander had sharply rebuked a manservant in the hall for some trifling offence, ordered lunch to be prepared in half an hour, all in a firm, unmoved voice, and passing into his study, he had shut and locked the door. Thekla, apparently neither seeking nor expecting sympathy, gave a little gasping sob as she passed the door of the library where her mother had been laid such a short time before, and rushed quickly up the stairs to her own room, weeping beneath her heavy veil. And Keith himself had come here, where always before he had been sure of kindly, loving interest, perhaps hitherto too lightly regarded, and here, where every book and picture and trifling ornament spoke of her presence, he best understood the change.

He sighed deeply, and buried his head in his hands, and wondered, with an impatience that allowed of no answer, why these things should be. Why should the happiness of his home be thus shattered? Why should the gentle little woman, to whom life had been so sweet, be taken from it? In the crude materialism that, all unconsciously perhaps, he accepted as the major part of his creed, there was no connection between religion and the troubles and perplexities of his daily life, and the consolations granted to other mourners were almost empty words to him. It was

true that his stepmother might be happier in the new life that had opened to her, but she had been very happy in this. The injury that had caused her death had given her but little bodily suffering, so there was no relief in the thought that her pain was ended; he could only think of her death in the light of the loss to those left behind.

He was dimly conscious of the fact that his grief was selfish, but it possessed at least one rare element of unselfishness—he was more sorry for another than for himself. He knew, with the unerring intuition of a similar nature, how overwhelming was his father's sorrow, and his keen sympathies were aroused for the cold, proud man who could neither seek nor comprehend that sympathy; but deeper than this feeling—deeper even than his self-pity, lay a fund of tenderest thought for his little sister.

He foresaw that, as in the past, his father and he would differ often and quarrel occasionally, and that there would be no one now with ready wit to turn the differences of opinion into a jest, and enable them to pass away without bitterness; but they were men, equally proud, almost equally reserved, and that very pride and reserve would probably keep them from serious disagreements. But Thekla—poor little Thekla, with the warm, impulsive nature inherited from her foreign mother, a girl who needed such delicate handling, so much sunshine and tenderness—what would become of her?

She was to have left school this term, and passed the

autumn and winter under her mother's guidance, finishing her education with masters, in preparation for her introduction to society next year. The mother had looked forward to this time with as much eagerness as the daughter, and now there was nothing for the latter to contemplate but a cold, joyless future.

Naturally enough, the violence of her grief had prevented any such thought reaching Thekla yet, but Keith dwelt on it day after day with increasing dismay, and at length determined to approach his father on the subject. He seized the opportunity one afternoon when they were alone together in the library, but the result was not encouraging, for his father resented his interference at all.

"Thekla? She is only a child, a mere school-girl still. Of course she is now greatly—upset." In justice to Sir Alexander it must be admitted that he had paused, endeavouring to find some more appropriate word to describe his daughter's feelings, and Keith fancied that he shaded his face with his hand so that his son might not see how greatly he himself was "upset" by this allusion to his loss. "I suppose she wishes to remain at home now, but at the beginning of next term she will return to school, and, among girls of her own age, she will soon recover her ordinary high spirits."

The young man looked hard at his father to see if he really believed the truth of his own words, and was obliged to admit that he did, but Keith felt sure that it was a great mistake. Thekla would be unhappy at

home, but still more so at school. She had never liked her school-life, and Keith had seen enough of the gulf between the cold propriety of Miss Ludlow's character and the wild thoughtlessness of his sister's, to understand her dislike. No doubt the schoolmistress hoped to mould her pupils' dispositions into some kind of imitation of her own, but however well that might answer with others he was sure that the effect of such a vigorous course of hammering as would be necessary, might harden Thekla's nature, and destroy much of its sweetness.

"I think you are mistaken," he said quickly. "Thekla is no longer a child, but a very sensitive girl, with much deeper feelings than you seem to suspect. Don't send her back to school; she will be miserable there."

"I have stated my intentions, Keith," his father replied coldly. "You are of age, and no longer subject to my commands—whether that is to your advantage or not is a matter of opinion—but I must be the best judge as to my daughter's welfare, and I presume that Thekla will still acknowledge my authority."

Keith knew that he was to consider himself suppressed, but he was still unconvinced, and Sir Alexander, looking at the determined young face opposite him, smiled somewhat sadly. "I should like to speak to you about yourself, Keith," he said, more kindly.

The young man looked up inquiringly.

"How much longer do you intend to remain at Cambridge? You have taken your degree—a very

creditable one too—and as I presume you have no idea of seeking a fellowship, I think it is time you adopted some profession.”

“I suppose you are right,” Keith answered slowly. “Cambridge is a very pleasant place, and I am extremely unwilling to leave it, but it is time I earned my bread and butter.”

“As to the bread and butter, that need not disturb you during my lifetime.”

“You are very good——”

An expression of pain crossed the elder man's face. “You need not carry your civility to the extent of thanking me,” he said, almost bitterly.

Keith looked up in astonishment, but failed to read his father's expression aright, and Sir Alexander continued in his ordinary quiet, even tones, “That was not my reason for speaking about it. I can afford to support you, I hope; but I do not like to see a young man of your abilities spending his time in—I was about to say ‘idleness,’ but that would scarcely describe your means of spending time, I suppose?”

“I don't know about that,” Keith replied frankly. “I spend a lot of time in work that can't be literally described as profitable, but,” with a slight laugh, “that is not altogether what most fellows call ‘idleness’!”

“And what is your last craze?” Sir Alexander asked, with a smile that was almost approving, and which, therefore, the son accepted as sarcastic.

“Smith, with whom I am reading, calls it medicine.”

A gratified look crossed the father's face. “Have you another name for it?”

Keith laughed again. "Some of his experiments are novel, and very risky, and the lectures go by the name of 'poisons and pops.' Most of the chemical experiments end in smoke, you see, and it is prophesied that we shall all go out in gas! I like it."

His father laughed quite genially. "I remember passing through the same sort of experience. It did me little good as a general practitioner, perhaps, but at the same time it did me no harm, and," watching the clever young face opposite him with some anxiety, "it does not appear to have injured you; but I should like to know where it will end."

"Where it will end?" Keith repeated. "I don't understand what you mean."

"My meaning is—how long do you intend to make an amusement of this study?"

Keith looked at him steadily. "That depends on you, father. My scholarships pay my fees, but they don't keep me, and if you wish me to work for myself, I will, of course, give up this little diversion."

"Then you are not taking up medicine in earnest?"

The voice was cold and calm, but their eyes met, and Keith was startled at the anxiety in his father's gaze.

"I am afraid I disappoint you, father," he said, quickly and uneasily, the colour deepening on his cheek. "I like the science of medicine immensely, and of course I am going through the whole show, lectures, clinical course, and all the rest of it, like other fellows, but I hate practical surgery, I loathe sick people, and—and there are other objections,"

hurriedly. "On such foundations I fear I should not build a successful practice."

There was silence for a short space ; Keith almost dreaded what would come next. Sir Alexander had watched his son's face closely, and he read the refusal aright, and the lines on his own rugged face deepened. He saw suddenly, but as clearly as if Keith's mind had been an open book before him, that the young man's strongest reason against entering his father's profession was the fear of having to work under that father, the thought of the constant intercourse that must ensue. But he determined that Keith should never know what pain he had caused him, and bit his lip and set his face rigidly.

"You can go back to Cambridge when you like, and stay as long as you like," he said abruptly "But you must tell me what you intend to do at the end of that time. You understand that it will be necessary for you to have a profession eventually? What will it be?"

"Upon my word," replied Keith frankly, "I don't know."

His father made a gesture of annoyance. "That is absurd. You must have some kind of wish, and I have no desire to fetter your choice. Naturally, I should have preferred my own profession for you, but if you do not care for it, there is no more to say about it. What do you say to politics—diplomacy?"

Keith shook his head, but remained silent for a few minutes. His father had astonished him. He had always understood that Sir Alexander wished him to

become a doctor, but he had formed no idea of the extent of the elder man's interest in the matter. He could see now how great the disappointment was, and felt annoyed with himself at the thought of the pain he had inflicted; but no idea of recalling his decision entered his head, and, true to his usual instinct of reserve, he did not allow his father to see that he had any deep feeling on the subject. On the contrary, he returned with unusual flippancy to the last proposal.

"Diplomacy? No; there's too much wire-pulling in that profession to suit me. Young diplomatists without influential relatives don't get much chance. In the days of the late lamented Pitt Crawley they wasted their sweetness on the desert air of the Court of Pumpnickel, now they are sent to the South American Republics, where the only variation in the monotony of their underpaid existence is the annual revolution. It isn't good enough!"

"You used to talk of the army."

"I am too old now; besides," with a smile, "I outgrew that wish years ago."

"The law? Having taken your degree in arts already, I believe you would only have to read with a barrister, and keep your terms."

"Do you think my terms would ever keep me?" Keith asked, smiling again. "No, I've no taste for legal work."

"The Church then?" after some consideration.

"No, no," Keith cried, with conviction. "Not that! I don't trouble much about religion, but," with unusual

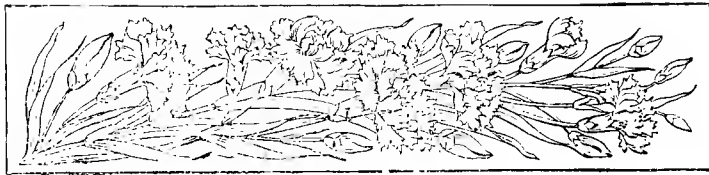
earnestness, "I would never enter the Church without a very different feeling."

His father sighed and leant back in his chair, letting his eyes rest with an inscrutable expression on the young man's face. He did not speak, and Keith waited patiently enough. At length the elder man rose and took out his watch.

"I must go. I have a consultation with Grimshaw at four o'clock. If matters had been different, Keith—if you had applied yourself to medicine as a profession instead of an amusement, I should have wished to introduce you to him. He is the leading man in his own line, but——" he broke off abruptly, with an expression that was almost pain.

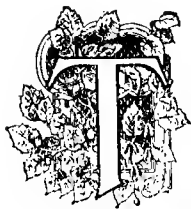
Keith sat for a moment in silence, with compressed lips and knitted brows, then he cleared his throat of a strange huskiness that had come there, and looked up to speak. But he was too late; the door was closing, and his father had gone.





CHAPTER III.

KENNETH.



THEKLA sat by the open window of the drawing-room, looking out with eyes that yet saw nothing on the hot, dusty Square garden. Some work lay in her lap, a book by her side, but both were forgotten, her whole mind was occupied with that most engrossing subject, self-pity. She was now beginning to realise what Keith's calmer and more selfish nature had allowed him to understand at once—the personal side of her grief.

She was alone, so terribly alone, although the same roof sheltered her father and brother, and although one or both might even now be in the house. Her father was kind, and Keith gentle and even tender whenever they met, but neither knew how to supply the sympathy for which the girl's sensitive nature craved. They had their own pursuits. Sir Alexander

had returned at once to his duties, Keith to his books, each, with that similarity of character of which they were so curiously ignorant, seeking to bury sorrow in continuous work. And meanwhile Thekla was left for hours at a time in the terrible solitude of rooms haunted with suggestions of the "vanished hand," and which time had not yet taught her to contemplate with the sad pleasure that would come afterwards.

She had no real occupation. Her mother had managed her house, as she did everything else, so quietly and unobtrusively that the reins of government were invisible, even to her daughter, and although Thekla understood vaguely that there was a new element of discomfort in the house, she had no idea that the household stood in need of her guidance and supervision now. Her school-life had interrupted her childish friendships, and Stella Wincanton, the only person to whom she would have readily turned for companionship, was at Miss Ludlow's school, finishing her education with all practicable speed, in order that she might return to Scotland at midsummer to take real charge of her motherless home. But as one who had passed through the same trouble as her own, Thekla would have been very glad to receive Stella's sympathy now, if it could have been obtained without the dreaded accompaniments of Miss Ludlow's sharp voice and irritating restrictions, and the chattering curiosity of her other schoolfellows.

Thekla felt strangely weary—bodily and mentally. The extreme heat of the early summer, the absence of

regular exercise (for she had scarcely left the house since the day of the funeral), and the weight of her tear-swollen eyelids, all combined to render her languid, and at length the tired head fell back on the soft cushions of the sofa, and she dropped into a heavy slumber.

A knock at the door did not disturb her; it was a matter of too frequent occurrence to demand attention from a member of the doctor's family, and the butler had orders to admit no callers. She still lay there, looking so small and delicate in her heavy black dress, when the door opened to admit a very tall young man, so like Sir Alexander and his son in height, figure, and colouring, as to suggest a near relationship.

But Kenneth Thorold was a handsomer man than either of his cousins. He had the striking air and graceful carriage of the elder, and the features that were sharp and rugged in Keith's face here assumed a rare charm. The hair was as dark, but thicker, and had a characteristic wave over the brow, while the dark grey eyes were softer and kindlier in expression. He entered the room with the ease of familiarity, for this had been his only home in childhood and boyhood, and Keith and Thekla had then regarded him as a brother; but he had been abroad for more than two years, and he started back now in shocked surprise at the change in his little cousin's face. He had last seen her a bright, high-spirited girl, full of mischievous fun and gaiety, and he could hardly believe that this sad, drooping little figure was indeed Thekla.

His movement aroused her, and she sprang to her

feet with a glad little cry that changed at once to a wail of pain.

"Oh! Kenneth—you know?"

"Yes, dear." He put his arm round her with the old, kindly, brotherly embrace, and she cried softly on his shoulder. "I wish I could have been here before. I was in Greece—up among the mountains—and I missed the telegrams, somehow. I found them in Athens on the Saturday, and came home at once."

She looked at him piteously. "You would have liked to have seen her, Kenneth?"

"Yes, dear. She was very good to me."

"She was always good——"

Thekla was trembling now, and he led her gently to a sofa and sat down by her side with her hand in his, waiting until she should be able to speak again.

"I thought you would come," she said at last; "Keith said so too."

"Keith was at home in time?"

"Yes; he came up the day after the—the accident," she said brokenly. "*He* came down to Miss Ludlow's at once to fetch me."

"That was right," Kenneth said, wondering at the emphasis and at the sudden touch of bitterness in her voice.

"Yes, but——" With the old sisterly familiarity came the longing to confide all her troubles to this most sympathetic hearer, and she burst out impulsively, "It was the day *after*, Ken, and father had never sent for me. I believe he had forgotten me," very bitterly.

"Hush ! Thekla, dear, you must not think that," he said quickly " Perhaps he thought it better——"

"Better ! To let her have strange nurses to wait on her, and her own daughter away ?"

He did not know what to answer, and, utterly bewildered by this strange turn of affairs, he could only look at her in silence.

"Kenneth, listen ! You know how I loved her ? You don't doubt it ?"

"No, indeed, dear. No one could——" he began, but she interrupted him quickly.

"Then listen. While she was lying here—dying, and he knew it—I was at school, knowing nothing of it. And I was laughing and playing noisy, vulgar games when Keith came to fetch me to *her* ! Oh ! it was cruel of my father—cruel ! I will never forgive him or myself !"

Keith would probably have sought to dismiss the discussion with the reasonable remark that it was ridiculous to blame either her father or herself for that unlucky game, but Kenneth understood her better, saw that she was hysterical and unstrung, and dealt wisely and gently with her.

"Did your mother wish you to be sent for ?"

"She was insensible. She knew nothing until after Keith came."

"Then, dear, why should you blame your father ? Think of his agitation, and the confusion there must have been in the house. How could he remember any one but her ?"

She hung her head, abashed. "I never thought of that. Poor father! I am glad you thought of it in that way, Ken."

He looked at her pitifully. "How pale you are, child. Have you been out to-day?"

"No, Ken," with a little shrinking movement.

"Then go and put on your hat, and come for a walk with me," he said, with brotherly arbitrariness.

"I couldn't, Ken. Keith took me out the other day, and we met some people, the Turners—you remember them? And they *would* talk—as if *it*—was—was something to discuss—like the weather! Oh! I couldn't——"

Kenneth set his mouth hard as if he would like to talk to the Turners. "I remember them. You shan't meet them, or any one else, Thekla. We'll send for a cab, and drive right away somewhere, and have a walk in peace."

He overruled all her objections with masterful composure, and at length she consented to his plan.

"Where is Keith?" he asked, as she rose to leave the room.

"I don't know," she answered. "I haven't seen him since lunch."

"And your father?"

"He is out seeing patients, I suppose," she said wearily.

"And how do you and Keith spend the day?" he asked curiously.

"Keith is reading something—medical books, I

think," she replied, with the same air of indifference. "He works in the library, and I—I do *nothing*."

"My word, what a confession! No wonder you look so doleful, little woman. Doing nothing may be a very pleasant occupation under certain circumstances, but one wants to be in good spirits, and it is generally advisable to have a companion. May I help you to do nothing, Thekla?"

She looked up with a faint smile. "Perhaps, if you help me, I may do *something* instead. But it is so dreary to begin it alone."

"All right, here's my hand on it," he said brightly. "We two idlers will try to make each other work. Now run off, and get your hat, and while I am waiting, I will see if old Keith is in the library."

He found Keith sitting in much the same position in which Sir Alexander had left him. Some books lay before him, but he was not studying, for his father's face, the strange wistfulness of the eyes and voice that had never before betrayed emotion to the son, came between him and the pages. He dwelt on his father's words and looks with curious intentness and an ever-increasing wonder. He was tempted to believe, not only that his father cared greatly about his profession and future prospects, for that was compatible with the care bestowed on his education, but that, moreover, despite the apparent indifference of former years, there was deep down in the elder man's heart a real tenderness for his son. Keith was surprised to find how much this thought affected him. He longed to burst

through the barrier of pride and coldness that kept them apart, and it was in this softened mood that Kenneth found him.

He was delighted to see his cousin. Their childhood and boyhood had been passed together, and although he was two years younger than Kenneth, his strength of mind and superior knowledge had made him the leader in many a boyish escapade. At college their paths had lain further apart. Keith had devoted himself to study with characteristic ardour, while Kenneth, who had spent two years already in avoiding lectures with great dexterity, made a futile effort to read with his cousin, and after many yawns and much weariness of spirit (the latter being freely shared by teacher and disciple), he fled to his former pursuits with the glee, and yet something of the shamefacedness, of a school-boy escaped from lessons. He was pre-eminently a man of action, and although by no means ill-read, books had little attraction for him. And yet his fellows were wont to declare him more of an enigma than his hard-reading namesake. Men who read for pleasure and row for exercise are not unknown in the university, and generally earn a good name in the schools and on the river. But a man who could row, and ride and drive, who played football and cricket on occasion, and took hearty pleasure in them all, and yet could find equal delight in pottering about the slums and alleys of the town, interviewing "sweated" labourers and "sweating" masters, discontented tenants, and not less discontented landlords; who could attend political meetings

and wade through dry Blue-books; who had an opinion on most subjects, and was not slow to declare it, and yet could only scrape through examinations with no credit to himself or others, was not easily understood by either the bees or the drones of his college.

But Keith understood him so far as to have a genuine affection and respect for him. He knew that although the tutors and examiners might think little of the power of Kenneth Thorold's brain, there was in him some of the stuff that has helped to make England's worthiest sons—courage, endurance, honesty, a desire to do his duty to himself and his neighbour—and with such a foundation and his hereditary advantages, there lay a possibility of a grand future before him. So far he had done nothing as comfortably as any young fellow of his age, but he had contrived to do it with a great appearance of working hard that may have imposed on inexperienced people, such as himself and his little cousin. He had visited a good many countries, and in the intervals of such sport as each land provided, he had diligently inquired into the social problems of its people, obtaining sufficient information, accurate and otherwise, to fill many quarto volumes had he been so disposed. Fortunately, however, he had preferred to learn a little more before inflicting his views and conjectures on a suffering public. He had inherited sufficient means to render him independent of a profession, and a name and estate of such consideration as to entitle him to a certain position among Scotsmen, at all events. But his home was a venerable keep,

well preserved, and extremely picturesque, but not altogether adapted to modern requirements; and he had been heard to observe that his ancestors must have designed the house with the fell purpose of driving him from it during eight months of the year. The tenants on his great stretches of moorland and mountain were few, and if their somewhat hard lot required any amelioration, they had not yet suggested it to the young laird, whom they regarded with old-fashioned, hearty loyalty, and an admiration that was probably due more to his personal attractions than to any good qualities which he happened to possess.

Keith looked at him now with great pleasure. “*I am* glad to see you, old fellow,” he said simply; then, unconsciously repeating Thekla’s words, “I thought you would come.”

“Of course,” Kenneth answered, and explained the reason of his delay. He had heard but few details from the old butler, and had not liked to ask Thekla, and, therefore, he turned to Keith for particulars. He listened with real emotion to the recital, and with his glistening eyes and mobile face opposite, Keith found it easier to speak of the sad experiences of those few short days than he would ever have supposed possible.

“I am thankful she did not suffer,” Kenneth said sadly. “Did she ever speak of me?”

“Yes; on the last day. She had been talking of our old childish days—almost laughing at the recollection of the two little sulky cubs who came so unwillingly to welcome my father’s new wife. Do you

remember, Ken?" The old recollections drew forth the familiar, childish name, as they had done with Thekla before. "We tried to shove each other forward, you asserting that she belonged most to me, while I as stoutly declared that you were the elder, and ought to speak first."

"I remember. She burst into a peal of laughter, and captivated us both at once."

"And then she went on, reminding me how I used to come to her with confessions, and you too, both afraid to go to my father—recalling all sorts of stupid little pranks."

"I remember," Kenneth said again. "There was no one like her then—or at any time," with a little break in his voice. "Well?" for Keith had lapsed into silence.

"She spoke about us—in the future, you know," Keith said, somewhat vaguely and hesitatingly, then, with a sudden resolve, he looked full at his cousin, and went on quickly. "She looked into my eyes, Kenneth, and asked me to promise to look after Thekla. And you, too—she sent her love to you, and said that as you had been a son to her, she trusted you to be a brother to Thekla."

"I will," Kenneth said, very low but earnestly. "Poor little Thekla! Did you promise, Keith?"

"Of course."

"Nicely you are keeping your promise, then!" his cousin cried hotly, with a sudden recollection of the desolate little figure upstairs in the drawing-room.

“What do you mean?”

“What I say. When I arrived here half an hour ago, there was that poor child alone, all the life and spirit gone from her, and not a soul caring a pin about her. Do you call that looking after her?”

Keith began an indignant retort, and then stopped. Was it not true? Had he given a thought to Thekla that afternoon? What had he done to lighten her misery? He uttered a kind of groan and looked down.

“I am a selfish brute,” he said slowly “Poor little girl! I had been thinking of myself—and my father—and I forgot her altogether.”

Kenneth could not repress a smile at the boyish confession. “Poor old fellow,” he said affectionately. “I expect it will not be an easy thing to look after a girl, but we shall have to help each other. Ah! there she is. I am going to take her out—will you come too? Come along. I should like to tell you about the places I’ve seen, and ask your advice on sundry perplexing problems.”

“And make up to me generally for having pointed out in the gentlest manner possible what a brute I am! All right, old fellow, I’ll come.”

The little expedition did them all good. Kenneth talked nearly all the time, and chiefly about himself—a theme on which he was not usually so discursive, but it had the advantage of drawing the attention of his hearers from their own troubles. And, indeed, to Thekla his conversation was a revelation. In her narrow, schoolgirl world the great social questions

of the day had never entered, and it was strange to hear her old playfellow explaining the relative positions of man in all parts of the civilised world of which he had knowledge—and some perhaps of which he had none—with the happy audacity of youth, and to realise that the matters which he brought within her comprehension were agitating the finest intellects of the most intellectual nations.

“And can you help in all this, Kenneth?” she asked, with wide-opened eyes.

“I can do my little utmost,” he answered quietly, “and that’s all a man can do.”

“And you, Keith?” She looked admiringly at her brother. “You who are so clever—what are you going to do?”

Keith flushed a little, and shook his head. “Mind my own business and try to mind yours, my child. That will exhaust my brain power, I expect.”

She was disappointed. “Don’t you care for these things that Kenneth cares for? Are you not troubled about the poor and suffering?”

“Not much,” he answered frankly. “I am far more troubled about a poor young man whose father wants him to start curing the suffering.”

“He is right,” she cried, with conviction. “It must be better to cure those who are in pain and sorrow now, than to read dusty old books, written by people who died hundreds of years ago.”

Kenneth gave him a curious quizzical look. “Was that the trouble this afternoon?”

"A paternal lecture—exactly," Keith replied. "My father's views and Thekla's as to the objects of a medical career don't quite coincide, but the result is the same—each wishing to see me a full-fledged doctor at the earliest possible moment."

"Well?"

"Well?" mockingly.

"You know what I mean. What are you going to do?"

"Mind my own business, as I said just now, and Thekla's, when I remember it."

His tone was light and mocking still, but it conveyed an intimation that he meant to bestow no more confidences at present.

"What an odd fellow you are," Kenneth said, somewhat irritably. "I believe you like medical work better than anything else, so why in the world don't you take it up seriously, as your father wishes?"

Keith shrugged his shoulders. "If it were all theory and no practice, like your socialism or philanthropy, or whatever you call it, I wouldn't mind."

Kenneth flushed. "What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"What I say. Do you mean to tell me that you would give up your present life, rushing about all over the world, getting all the fun you can out of it, and would settle down quietly to work out your theories in some dead-alive hole—Glasdhu, for instance?"

"There is no need," Kenneth answered hastily

"There's nothing for me to do at Glasdhu—the people get on very well without me."

"I never said they didn't," his cousin laughed drily. "You are begging the question, old fellow. At the same time, I may perhaps be allowed to remark that in my opinion the world will get on very well without my offices as a gratuitous healer of suffering, to please Thekla, and that my father's practice is more likely to thrive without my services as assistant or partner."

"Is that his wish?"—Kenneth and Thekla asked simultaneously, and with obvious curiosity.

"I really don't know. He has not honoured me with his confidence," Keith replied, so shortly that both understood an implied snub.

"I beg your pardon——" Kenneth began, but Keith interrupted him good-temperedly.

"All right, old fellow. I need not have been so crusty. Now let us talk of something more pleasant."

The others hastened to comply with this request, but despite his own words it was easy to see that Keith's mind was still full of the interview with his father, and that he was quietly following up some train of thought, probably painful and unwelcome.

He was very silent and abstracted at dinner that evening, and Sir Alexander was more taciturn than usual, rendering it hard work for Kenneth to keep up the conversation. Thekla, however, was brighter than she had been at any time since her mother's death, listening with interest and occasionally replying to her cousin's remarks. At length, however,

he electrified them all by making a simple suggestion.

"You would all be the better for a change, uncle,"—Sir Alexander had received this appellation years before, when he first undertook the guardianship of his young cousin, and it had remained unchanged after the guardianship had ceased. "Will you come for a cruise in the *Dryad*? She is lying up at Cowes doing nothing, and would be much better employed if taking us somewhere—wherever you please."

His three hearers looked up with very different expressions.

"Thank you, Kenneth; you are very kind," Sir Alexander replied, somewhat taken aback by the suddenness of the proposal. "I am afraid I could not get away just now. There are some patients whom I could not leave. But if Keith and Thekla like——" and he looked inquiringly and somewhat wistfully towards his son.

But Keith would not meet his eyes. "I should like it immensely," he said slowly, almost sullenly, as his cousin thought.

"And Thekla?" Kenneth said.

She looked at him with sparkling eyes, and said nothing, but there was no doubt as to her answer.

"Where would you like to go?" her cousin asked, with much composure.

"Oh! may I really go, father?"

"Certainly, my dear." And Kenneth was not mistaken in his belief that there was complete indifference

in Sir Alexander's voice. "I had forgotten, though," he added suddenly, with a sharp sigh. "You are a big girl now, and can't go yachting alone with a couple of young men."

"Not with Keith and Kenneth?" Thekla asked, with the pretty, brown eyes widely opened.

"I think not."

"Oh, I say!" quoth Kenneth, in great dismay

But Keith looked up with a smile. "We'll hunt up a *duenna*—what-d'ye-call-it? *chaperon*—all right. There's your old governess whom we used to plague so, Miss Hilton—where is she? You correspond fitfully, don't you?"

"Yes, she is in London." Thekla's voice was quite eager. "May I see if she will come, father?"

"Certainly," her father said again, without any show of interest.

"There'll be a salary or something of that kind to arrange, I suppose, sir?" Keith said, turning directly to his father for the first time.

"Of course. Tell Miss Hilton to write me a line on the subject, Thekla."

"Oh, thank you, father," she said gratefully.

"Where will you go, Thekla? You'll be skipper, you know, and we will obey you most humbly," her cousin said cheerfully, "even to making a Polar expedition, if you wish."

She smiled. "Haven't you some place that you want to visit? Any business to transact?"

"Until August, when I must visit my fortress, for the

benefit of the tenants and the grouse—especially the grouse,” with a quick glance at Keith, “I have no business but to obey the orders of Captain Thekla, and get some colour in her cheeks.”

There was enough colour in her cheeks now “You are kind to me, Ken. But I should like to go to Scotland now, if you like it also. Stella Wincanton, my great friend at school, lives close to your home. Her father has mines at Glensheen, and Stella will be at home next week. You would like Stella, Ken, for she thinks a good deal about the poor—the miners, and their wives and children.”

Sir Alexander looked somewhat keenly at his young kinsman. “Are you going to develop into the model landlord? ‘Philanthropy, and all that?’” he asked, with a touch of earnestness beneath his sarcasm.

“I’m a long way off it yet,” the young man answered, with a laugh, that yet betrayed some embarrassment. “But this schoolfellow of Thekla’s might polish me up.”

“She has not the air of the serious young lady of the period—the girl with a mission,” Keith said, somewhat maliciously, remembering how he had first seen Stella Wincanton.

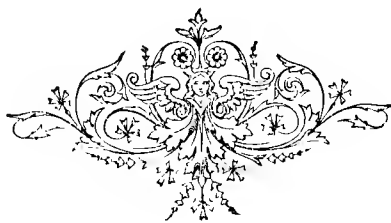
And Thekla, glancing at his face, remembered it too, and other things intimately connected with the recollection, and the pretty, eager look faded from her face.

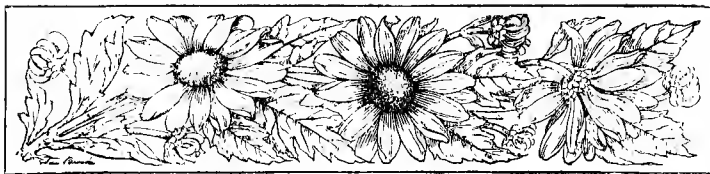
“You remembered to ‘mind Thekla’s business’ this time, at any rate,” Kenneth said quietly, as he bade Keith good-night,

“Don’t give me too much credit for it,” Keith returned, almost roughly. “I have done more in the way of breaking good resolutions than in keeping them to-night.”

“Do you mean to tell me how?”

“No, I don’t. You are a good fellow, Kenneth, but if I don’t find some flaws somewhere in your perfection, I shall end by hating you. Good-night.”





CHAPTER IV

GLENSHEEN.



GLENSHEEN was not altogether given up to mines. Beyond the glen and the steep mountain-side, now hideous with gaunt, grim chimneys and unlovely little houses, and heaps of slack coal, and the bare, hard-trodden earth, whereon smoke and dust and the tread of numberless feet combined to prevent the growth of grass or heather, lay a stretch of moorland, rising with increasing beauty and boldness until it ended in the cliffs at Arsaig Bay, and the great rolling sea beneath.

The southern side of the bay belonged more or less to the mine. Here were more ugly little houses and sheds round and about the wharfs, and thither ran the miniature railway, and the smoking, grunting little engines, and the trucks with their ceaseless creaking and banging, all day long. Here, too, came the little

coaling brigs, masts and hulls and rigging and sailors partaking of the same uniform sombre hue, while even the yellow beach was blackened with lumps of coal. But the northern side, two miles or more away, rose superior to the influence of smoke and dirt, lifting its purple heathery slopes hundreds of feet above the little grimy hive of toiling bees, and supporting, half-way up the hill, the white house of the owner of the mine, Mr. Wincanton.

The mine was not visible from the house. It was hidden by a rising knoll fringed with a plantation of firs, and there was, therefore, nothing to destroy the beauty of the view across the noble sweep of the bay, where the varied colours of the rocks caught every light and shadow of the sky, and used them to produce new and wondrous tints, all in striking contrast with the golden beach and the blue sky beyond. Even the ugly little wharf was softened by distance and smoke, and the sails of the passing colliers were transformed into a semblance of beauty

The house itself was an unpretentious, roomy building, commenced perhaps in the beginning of the last century, and added to by succeeding lairds of Glensheen; more picturesque than strictly beautiful, and possessing an air of homely comfort that was a certain index to the character of its master. Mr. Wincanton, although a southron by name and breeding, represented, in right of his mother, a long line of Scottish ancestors, who had been lairds of Glensheen, and leaders in many a Border foray, as well as in expeditions more credit-

able to their position and patriotism, long before the black diamonds were drawn from beneath the barren moors to replenish the family coffers in an altogether delightful manner. But the present laird was a great contrast to most of his predecessors. A man of culture and refinement, but too quiet and retiring to display his abilities to much advantage, he was still a struggling barrister, earning more by his pen than his practice of law, when the death of his uncle, and the very unexpected terms of the will of the latter, left him owner of a large estate and a prosperous coal mine. He was then a middle-aged man, on whom years of poverty had left their mark, and he was more ready to court the seclusion that the isolated position of his new home offered than to make any exertion to take the place of a leading man in his county. His wife's death, not long after his accession to wealth, tended to strengthen this decision, and he had since devoted himself entirely to the welfare of his two children, and to his favourite studies, giving a kindly welcome to all who might chance to visit him, but in no way seeking the outside world.

But Stella had come home with very distinct ideas of her duty, and created a certain revolution in his plans. Although a kind master and an indulgent landlord, he had hitherto taken but small interest in the affairs of his tenants, nearly all miners in his own employment. Everything connected with the mine had been left to the manager, and the details of the estate to his grieve ; but this did not accord with his daughter's views of the

responsibilities of the lord of the soil, and she made energetic attempts at reformation. Despite her youth and high spirits, she was very thoughtful and earnest, and for some time past, during her short holidays from school, she had dwelt carefully on the ways and wants of the Glensheen people. There were many grievances to redress, many bad customs to overthrow, but not unnaturally she met with much opposition where she had looked for hearty co-operation. Her father, indeed, when once convinced of the necessity for change, allowed her to do very much as she pleased, but she found it hard to overcome the sturdy conservatism of his old manager, and still more difficult to break through the reserve and ignorance of those whom she sought to help. But she went on her way bravely, combating all discouragements with the knowledge that she was doing right, and praying for strength to persevere in the struggle.

It was a somewhat arduous task for a girl of eighteen, and, moreover, she had undertaken the management of her father's home and the care of her little brother, but she was young and strong, and faced her difficulties with a rare courage and enthusiasm that enabled her to overcome most of them.

She was standing now, with her father and brother, at the head of the little pier at Glensheen, awaiting the arrival of the yacht, whose white sails were visible as the dainty little ship swept round the point of the bay. Mr. Wincanton's eye dwelt with loving pride on his daughter. She looked very fair and bright, in her light

summer dress and shady hat, her soft hair slightly stirred by the gentle breeze, her blue eyes deepened and shining with excitement and anticipation, and the earnest lines of her face softened and relaxed by the same feeling. Young Jack hung on her arm, shouting out imaginary orders to the distant yachtsmen, and prophesying grave disasters if his warnings as to rocks and currents were disregarded.

"I think Mr. Thorold is likely to know as much about the coast as you do, young man," his father said, with a smile. "He was born at Glasdhu, not ten miles from here across the hills."

"But he never comes here, father," the boy replied sturdily. "Campbell" (the grieve) "says he's a what-do-you-call-it? absent—no, absentee landlord." If only Kenneth could have heard that opprobrious term applied to him! "I shall ask him when he comes if he *does* know about the currents and the sunken rocks," the boy proceeded calmly. "And if he doesn't, I'll teach him."

"Will you also undertake his education with regard to his duties towards his tenants?" his father asked, with a mischievous glance at Stella. "My Star, here, will be too busy teaching her old father to have any time to spare for a new-comer."

"Father!" the girl's face flushed and became troubled. "You don't mean that? Have I interfered too much, dear?"

"No indeed, my Star," he said tenderly. "I was only jesting. You did quite right in showing me

where my duty was neglected. Ah! here they come, and they are anchoring just in the right spot, Jack, so I presume that Mr. Thorold knows something of Arsaig Bay."

"The chart would tell him that much," Jack said shrewdly

His father laughed again. "I see. He is doomed to a lesson on local geography, even if he escapes the other matters. Well, here comes the boat," as the white gig, with its load of two darkly clad figures in the stern, and two stalwart young men in flannels at the oars, shot rapidly away from the yacht's side. "Welcome to Glensheen!"

"Many thanks!" came back the clear young voices from the rowers, and in few minutes hearty greetings were being exchanged on the pier.

After the first confused sentences, in which all talked at once, and confidences were impossible, Mr. Wincanton walked on with Miss Hilton, a kindly, homely woman of middle age, the two young men followed with Jack, indulging in a teasing and somewhat boisterous conversation, leaving Thekla to follow slowly with her friend—an act of thoughtful consideration for which both were grateful.

Thekla was looking better in health and spirits than when Kenneth had found her in London, but Stella was shocked at the change between her merry, rosy little schoolfellow and this pale, sad-eyed maiden.

"I wanted you so badly, Stella," Thekla said wistfully. "You can understand, for you know what it is," and she softly touched her black dress.

The eyes of the other motherless girl filled with tears. "Yes, dear, I know."

"Oh! Stella, why should it be? It is cruel!—cruel!"

But her friend looked up bravely. "No, dear, not cruel. It is right and for the best, although we don't know why. We shall know that, and all things that are beyond our comprehension now, when we meet them again."

"I can't think of that," Thekla cried; "it is too far off."

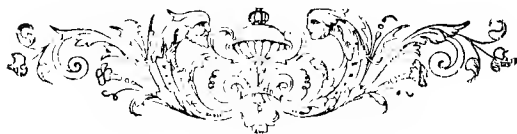
"It need never be far," Stella said softly; and gently, bravely, with infinite tenderness, she spoke of her comforting faith and hope.

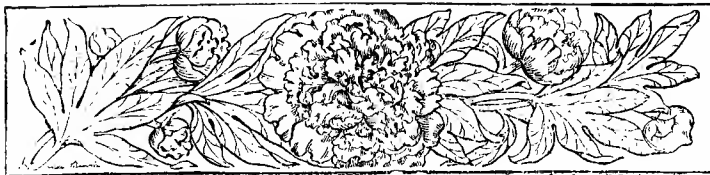
It was a revelation to Thekla. Like her brother, religion had been to her a thing apart from daily life, something to be thought of with awe, and more as a duty than a pleasure, on Sundays and when kneeling in prayer, but nothing more. She had felt a vague comfort in the knowledge that her mother's earnest faith and almost perfect life must have ensured for her a future of complete happiness in that Heaven of which the girl had formed but shadowy, indistinct ideas; but her loss was so tangible that it was an intense relief to lean on the stronger mind, and to contrast Stella's reliance on the reality of the belief she professed in the "Communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," with her own vague spiritual thoughts.

It was new to her, too, to think of a life to be spent in God's service. Kenneth had shown her what he

conceived to be his duty to man, Stella gave her a glimpse of higher and holier duties ; and if her face were still grave, it wore a happier and more contented air when she joined the other members of the party at Glensheen House, and she felt better and stronger after this conversation with her friend.

Her brother and Kenneth noticed the difference, and saw, too, how each day she brightened and expanded under Stella's influence, and they hoped much from the effects of this visit.





CHAPTER V

A PICNIC AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

TACK did not forget his determination to teach the laird of Glasdhu those things that he deemed essential to the well-being of a local magnate. The geographical lessons came with startling frequency, and some degree of irrelevancy, but no opportunity presented itself for the lecture on Kenneth's duty to his tenants until the Thorolds' visit to Glensheen had nearly come to an end.

A long-projected picnic in the woods behind Mr. Wincanton's house had at length been carried out, and the whole party assembled there one glorious afternoon in July. It was too hot for work, and even Miss Hilton was at length obliged to lay aside her interminable embroidery, and join in the desultory conversation of the others.

"What a beautiful view there is from here," she said, looking down the hill-side, past the white house, and away to the glittering sea.

"Yes," Thekla sighed. "I shall envy you this view, Stella, and your happy life here, when I am cooped up again at Miss Ludlow's."

Kenneth looked up quickly from his lazy, recumbent position at her feet. "You will not be at Miss Ludlow's for ever."

"No—o," doubtfully, and she sighed again. The prospect of home, under Sir Alexander's sway, was not much more inviting.

Stella laid her cool, white hand caressingly on the small brown one of her friend. "I wish you could stay here always," she said softly, "but I suppose your duty is there."

"At Miss Ludlow's?" said Thekla, incredulously.

"Wherever your father wishes you to be," Stella replied.

"That's rather a large order, Miss Wincanton," Keith said suddenly, with a curious earnestness underlying his light words. "You don't mean to contend that it is one's duty to go wherever, and do whatever, one's father wishes."

"I did not say so," Stella said gravely, answering his tone rather than his words. "But if the father's wishes are for the child's good, of course one must obey"

"Even against one's own judgment?"

She looked up, and met her father's smile. "I

don't think one's judgment would ever be contrary to duty," she said, in a low, clear voice. "Inclination might be, but of course that would give way."

Keith's face hardened. "I'm not so sure of that," he muttered.

"Oh, yes," she said quickly "You would not allow your inclination to overrule your sense of duty."

"I have, many times," he said shortly.

She looked pained. "But you are wiser now. You would not do it again?"

"I don't know." He relapsed into silence, dwelling on that well-remembered interview with his father, and the sacrifice which he knew he ought to make to Sir Alexander's wishes.

Kenneth remembered it too, and recalled Keith's words about his own duty. Somehow the young laird of Glasdhu was by no means so well contented with himself as he had been before this visit to Glensheen. He had gone over several times to his own property, and had been struck by its neglected appearance, and by the poverty of his people, and he started now at the curious appropriateness of the next remark—from little Jack.

"When are you going to live at Glasdhu, Mr. Thorold, and look after your people?"

Kenneth flushed, and glanced, almost involuntarily, at Thekla. "At once, Jack—this autumn, at least."

"Are you? That's right. Campbell says you ought."

"Who is Campbell?"

“Father’s grieve. I talk to him a lot, about—about everything.” The boy rested his face on his hands, and looked gravely at the young man. “He knows an awful lot, Campbell does.”

“Indeed! About me, for instance?”

“No, not about you, but about the people. He says Stella does too much for our people, they impose on her, but too much is better than too little, like your people.”

This was not very lucid, but the young landowner understood, and flushed deeply. It was rather hard on one who had set out to reform the world, to find that his own little corner wanted as much reformation as any. “They shan’t complain any more,” he said stoutly. “I’ll look after them in the future.” And, under certain conditions, he meant it.

The conversation had drifted into very unexpected lines, and Mr. Wincanton thought it wise to offer a diversion. “Isn’t it tea-time, Star? You have brought a kettle, I hope.”

“Oh, yes.” Stella sprang up, the others followed her, and in a few minutes all was active preparation.

A gipsy kettle was arranged, and all helpers were despatched to collect sticks to keep alight the very smoky and spluttering fire which Kenneth kindled with difficulty.

“Not that, Jack!” he shouted, as the junior member of the party attempted to insert a long green bough among the embers. “Do you want to destroy all my handiwork at one fell swoop? Now a nice little bundle

of twigs and dry moss, like Thekla's, is another matter altogether."

"It seems to me," Keith said lazily, "that it pays to be fire-maker to this assembly. Kenneth occupies a dignified position, and orders us all about, while his labours consist in sitting down and smiling at the kettle."

"You shut up!" cried the indignant fire-maker. "How would you like to sit and blow, and blow at a smoking log, like a sweet little cherub on a monument, *minus* the trumpet? I wonder what you are here for? Is it use or ornament, Miss Wincanton?"

"I think you must be the ornamental part, if you represent the cherub in the corner," Stella answered smiling.

"A pretty cherub! Six feet two inches without his boating shoes! 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind!' That fire's going out!"

"You ought to do your share, Keith," Thekla said reproachfully, producing another bundle of twigs for hurried transfer to the fire. "Here is poor Kenneth slaving like——"

"Pluto," suggested Keith, as she paused for want of a simile.

"What a shame!" Thekla cried indignantly.

"Oh, I wonder if Pluto got smuts on his nose!" shrieked Jack, in huge delight.

"With the notable exception of my champion here, I think you are all shamefully wanting in gratitude," Kenneth exclaimed tragically. "Thekla, is there a smut on my noble nose?"

"There is—on the very tip."

"You ought to keep it there as an honourable trophy of your arduous tasks," Stella said laughing.

"I would keep it as a lasting reproach to you idlers if I were not afraid of bringing on a squint and permanently injuring my beauty," Kenneth replied, with a dignity that was somewhat spoilt by a dab at his nose with his handkerchief. "Is it gone, Thekla?"

"No; it's bigger than ever."

"Not really? Then I can't undertake the operation. You must remove it, my cousin. Come to the romantic little burn yonder and cleanse my face."

Laughing, she accompanied him to where, at some little distance from the spot chosen by the picnic party, a tiny stream gurgled merrily down the hill to the cliff's edge, to leap with a bound on to the beach below. It was a lovely spot, where the ferns grew by the water's side, and dipped their long, graceful fronds into the hurrying stream, and above the tall ash-trees quivered and whispered, flinging light, changing shadows on the soft, mossy ground.

"This is a place to dream in," said Kenneth. "Sit down, Thekla, and let us rejoice in it together, away from fires and chattering tongues."

"I like that," she answered, with a smile, seating herself obediently on a boulder by the burn. "Pray whose tongue wags loudest and longest of all?"

"That's cruel. I did not think *you* would turn against me."

"Not really, Ken," she said quickly, with almost

childish entreaty in her voice. "I was only in play. I like to hear you laughing with Stella and the others."

"Then you shall always hear me—in reason, that's to say," he said lightly, but with a keen, earnest look at her face.

There was a glow of health on her cheek now ; his medicine had been very effective, though perhaps less so than he believed. In his presence she was always bright, considering it his due, the only possible return for his constant kindness and thoughtfulness, but naturally there were occasional attacks of grief and depression when alone, and of which she shrank from telling him.

He was now lying at her feet, looking at her with undisguised pleasure. "You like this place, Thekla?"

"Oh, don't I!"

"Why that sigh, then?"

"I don't know. I was thinking of going back, and school——"

"Is school still such a bugbear? Poor little girl! Can't you talk your father over?"

"Keith tried and failed, so what could I do?"

"Surely he would listen to you far more than to Keith?"

"No. He is proud of Keith, and I believe he loves him, although he never says so——"

"Of course he does, but he must care more for you than even for dear old Keith," he said quickly

"He doesn't care for me at all, Kenneth," in a very low voice.

“Thekla !”

“It is true—he never did. I think he forgets me when I am not with him, and wishes me away when I am.”

The bitter voice recalled the sad-eyed little maiden whom he had found and tried to comfort on his return to London. He leant forward and took her hand now, and found it cold and tremulous.

“Thekla, dear, I thought we had dispersed that old notion.”

“No, Kenneth, only banished it. It came back one day when he spoke of my return to school.”

“Dear, you are fanciful,” he said gently. “I wish you did not dislike that school so much.”

“It is not the school—or at least not altogether. It is the restraint—the feeling that one must be a machine like the others, and never do as one likes.”

Her cousin smiled. “What a pair of rebels you and Keith are ! He won’t become a doctor because your father wishes him to do so, and yet he loves the work, and you don’t want to return to school because you can’t do as you like there.”

She flushed and laughed a little. “You don’t understand.”

It seemed impossible to put into words her reasons for dreading the life at Miss Ludlow’s, her dislike of the narrow rules, against which she had formerly rebelled, and which she knew would be even more irksome now, when her high spirits were quenched with sorrow, and her heart was aching for sympathy. She

had expected Kenneth to understand her, and perhaps he did, although his next words were light and playful.

"I suppose not. Well, it's a pity there is no way of getting out of going there. I suppose you couldn't run away in the *Dryad*, carrying Miss Wincanton off with you?"

"She wouldn't wish to run away, for she is not going back to Miss Ludlow's. And besides, *she* has some one to love her and want her at home."

He drew a long, deep breath. "Don't, Thekla—don't speak like that!"

She looked up, surprised at his tone. "Very well, Kenneth."

"I suppose," he continued moodily, "that I can't interfere. Fathers have the chief right to order their daughters about until they marry. Why don't you get married, Thekla! You are grown up, aren't you?" and he watched her face anxiously, while his own flushed a deep crimson.

"I am eighteen, and as much grown up as I shall ever be," Thekla replied ruefully, but with perfect unconsciousness. "I'm awfully small for a Thorold."

"You'll do as you are; I don't want you to grow any taller. But how about marrying, Thekla?"

"I'm afraid I don't know any one to marry who would not be worse than Miss Ludlow," she answered, smiling again.

"I am not worse than Miss Ludlow. Marry me."

"You!" She burst into a merry peal of laughter. "Oh, Kenneth, what fun! What would my father

say?" Then a slight movement on his part made her look up quickly into his face, and she met the glance of his eager eyes fixed on her with a new, strange expression that somehow sent the warm blood rushing to her own cheeks. "Oh!—" she began, but got no further, for Keith's head appeared up the slope, and he came forward, walking quickly, and looking somewhat annoyed.

"There you are! What are you doing?"

"Discussing the relative merits of Miss Ludlow and your humble servant," Kenneth returned composedly.

"Is that all," said Keith, in a relieved tone.

"What did you expect?" Kenneth asked somewhat sharply; but Keith only looked at him with puzzled, earnest scrutiny. "What's up with you, old fellow?" Kenneth continued, slipping his arm through his cousin's.

"Nothing," Keith said shortly. "I thought you came to wash your nose, and you have not done it."

"Thekla, you have allowed me to forget my duty to my nose," Kenneth began, looking round hastily. But he received no answer, for Thekla had slipped quietly away to join the others.

"I say—" Kenneth said, in an odd, choked kind of voice, then broke off in his intended confidence.

"What?" not encouragingly.

"Well, you must act as my mirror, that's all. There," dipping his handkerchief into the stream and applying it to his nose, "am I all right?"

"Yes."

"Then let us be off. That kettle ought to be boiling by this time."

"Look here!" cried Keith, suddenly and wrathfully; "before you go I must tell you something. I won't have any humbug with Thekla—putting nonsensical ideas in her head——"

"What do you mean?" Kenneth commenced angrily, and then stopped short in confusion. Had he not done this very thing? His face grew very red, and he looked humbly enough at his cousin. "I—I—" he stammered, "Keith, don't you think she cares for me?"

"Of course not—except as she does for me. Kenneth, have you been talking like that to her?" His tone was irate and very threatening.

"I have," Kenneth acknowledged ruefully. "But you need not prepare to knock me down. She did not understand me at all, and treated the matter as an excellent joke."

"It may be a joke, but I don't see its excellence, and I won't have any more of it."

"Nor will she," Kenneth retorted, and turned on his heel.

The tea was ready by the time they returned, and all took their places. But although the Wincantons and Miss Hilton chattered and laughed and tried to make the conversation merry as usual, they could not help observing the silence of the three Thorolds. Thekla sat there, too happy for words, not venturing to lift her eyes for fear of what they might betray, living a lifetime of dreamy bliss in those few minutes. It was a

wonderful revelation that she had read in Kenneth's eyes, and all her troubles and anxieties seemed to be swallowed up in this new, great joy. Kenneth—her hero from childhood, her friend and comforter, her counsellor and guide—cared for her, deemed little, thoughtless Thekla worthy of his love. Those few words, that one glance, had been sufficient to change her from a child into a woman, with a woman's tender thoughts and hopes. She sat there, almost in silence, intent on her own reflections, answering at random any speech addressed to her, and seeing nothing of Kenneth's pain and Keith's silent wrath. It was with difficulty, too, that either of the cousins could take part in what was passing, and all felt a distinct thrill of relief when this uncomfortable meal could be pronounced over.

But Thekla's joy was of short duration. Unfortunately for her peace of mind, Keith had been thoroughly roused, and, full of the idea that he had neglected her, and had thus allowed this unpleasantness to arise, he was determined to continue to "mind" his little sister's "business." On the way home that evening he contrived to say a few words to her privately.

"Thekla, dear, Kenneth tells me that he has been talking nonsense to you this afternoon. It has annoyed me very much, but——"

"Did Kenneth say *that*?" Thekla interrupted, with uncontrollable pain in her voice.

"Yes," Keith said wrathfully. "He won't do it again. It may be his idea of fun but it isn't mine."

"Nor mine," she said, with a little gasp which

she could not repress, and her face grew pale and set.

“Poor little girl! it has worried you,” her brother remarked kindly “I must look after you better, little one.”

“Thank you, dear.” She called up a smile somehow, and then hurried on to join Stella and Jack, ignorant of the fact that she owed to that discerning youth the destruction of her little rosy dream.

For Jack had remarked pleasantly, when the hissing of the boiling kettle drew attention to the prolonged absence of two of the party, “Oh! those two—they always stay away a long time when *they* go together!”

Keith looked up, saw a significant smile pass between Mr. Wincanton and his daughter, and sprang to his feet.

“I’ll go and fetch them,” he said sharply.

And so half a dozen well-meant, but unconsciously mischievous words had shattered Thekla’s hopes, and brought on her an agony of shame for having allowed herself to place such a construction on her cousin’s idle words. She did not blame him, as her brother did; she loved him too well for that—all the fault was hers. But a barrier of shyness and reserve had sprung up between them, and she had to call up her pride and determination to hide her secret from all beholders, especially from those keen, searching, dark grey eyes that had seemed lately to read her inmost thoughts. It was, therefore, an actual relief to her when, a few days later, Kenneth announced his intention of going

to the United States for a few months to study the workings of some of his pet hobbies and aversions, and in the general clamour of regrets she trusted that her own silence and her brother's had passed unobserved.

"I thought you were going to stay at Glasdhu and study your tenants," Jack remarked.

Kenneth flushed. "They'll have to wait for the present," he said shortly.

Glasdhu, deprived now of the hopes in which he had lately indulged, would be intolerable to him. It was one thing to plan to settle down there, and prepare his old home for a young bride, it was another matter altogether to go there alone, even though he knew that his presence was sorely needed. No ! cowardly or not, he could not do this ; but nevertheless he felt ashamed of his own weakness.

His departure left a great void in the party at Glensheen. Every one was quieter and more thoughtful, all the plans and arrangements seemed to require some modification, but strangely enough, the person most affected by his absence seemed to be the one who had unconsciously brought it about—his cousin Keith. That reserved and somewhat selfish young man had made a resolution, and carried it out regardless of the difficulty and frequent annoyance to which it subjected him. Deeply puzzled as to the change in his little sister, very anxious that she should not miss the constant devotion and companionship to which Kenneth had now accustomed her, he determined even to neglect some of his best-loved studies rather than

Thekla. Remembering the interest she had taken in her cousin's plans and speculations, he endeavoured to create in her mind an interest in his own pursuits. It was uphill work at first, but both persevered gallantly. She felt no real interest in his scientific researches. To Kenneth's pupil medicine was merely a means of relieving human suffering; and to the theorist, immersed in the intricacies of cause and effect, climate and soil and hereditary tendencies, this view was almost as irritating as his father's habit of regarding all medical knowledge as a means of livelihood. Her cousin's social problems had been the first of any such questions presented to Thekla's mind, and she found it difficult to realise that there could be questions of greater importance in the estimation of others. But she had great faith in Keith, and tried hard to call up some enthusiasm for his studies.

And Stella, recollecting sundry pranks and frolics, smiled at the sight of little, noisy, reckless Thekla improving her mind under the tutorage of her grave young brother. She never spoke of it, but perhaps—for she was an observant young woman—she realised something of the magnitude of the sacrifice so quietly made by this selfish young man, and respected him the more for his reticence on the subject.

Nothing more was heard of Thekla's dislike to return to school, and when her visit to the Wincantons had come to an end, and she found herself shut up once more within the familiar walls of "The Elms" and he no less encompassing, if invisible, walls of Miss

Ludlow's restrictions, she submitted with a meekness surprising to herself and others. Her schoolmistress and companions noticed a great change in her, and while the former approved and the latter deplored, the loss of the high-spirited law-breaker, they were for once unanimous in attributing it to her recent affliction. Her last term at school was by far the most creditable. She displayed a novel thirst for knowledge of all kinds, and a somewhat embarrassing wish to acquire information that her teachers were quite unable to impart, especially on such light and trivial matters as modern variations of political economy, the several points of the great Labour question, the practicability of an Eight Hours Bill, and universal suffrage. Miss Ludlow at length lifted up her voice and hands in protest.

“ Stop, my dear. I knew your father was a clever man, and I have no doubt that he will expect your brother to be the same ; but he cannot suppose that I am capable of making his daughter a walking Parliamentary encyclopædia ! ”

And Thekla debated inwardly whether she were guilty of great deception in reserving to herself the information that her father cared nothing for all these things.

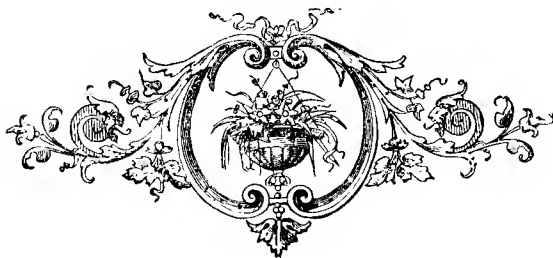
However, the result of this spirit of inquiry was advantageous to Thekla. Miss Ludlow did not care to plead ignorance on any matter discussed among her pupils, and found that Thekla possessed sufficient information to expose evasive or incorrect statements, and therefore judged it expedient that this young lady's

education should be considered complete. She wrote Sir Alexander a touching letter, extolling the many virtues of his only daughter, but suggesting that Thekla had reached an age when she might reasonably expect to return to her appreciative father and undertake the management of his house. Sir Alexander shrugged his shoulders and submitted to the inevitable, and Thekla exerted her utmost powers in a new direction to justify his leniency. With very different sentiments, but the same energy with which she had studied political economy and the theory of germs, she now attacked the details of housekeeping, and if the result were not commensurate with her efforts, she had at least the satisfaction of knowing that she had done her best, and that the house was a little more comfortable and cheerful than when she began.

But in spite of this employment and the reading that she carefully kept up, her life was very dreary during term time at Cambridge. She had as little inclination as her father now for general society or entertainments, but he probably did not understand how solitary her life was when Keith was away. The only variation of the monotony was the presence at a formal dinner of an elderly doctor or two, who generally treated her either to the form of conversation known as "talking down" to her supposed range of ideas, or, ignoring her, discussed "shop" that seldom had any relation to the matters which she had talked over with her brother.

But through all the dreariness of this time she

possessed one deep comfort. Her present life, her efforts to be useful to her father, her few opportunities of helping her poorer neighbours, were all part of that duty which Stella had declared that she ought to follow; and with an ever-growing sense of peace and contentment she dwelt on those other and higher thoughts that her friend had suggested.





CHAPTER VI.

AN ACCIDENT.



SUMMER had come again, bringing Keith home for the long vacation, and raising the question as to suitable movements for the family.

For once Keith gave general satisfaction, gratifying his father exceedingly by suggesting that he should accompany Sir Alexander on a projected trip to Germany to attend certain medical congresses there, while Thekla should accept a warm invitation to spend the summer at Glensheen, where her brother could join her when the congresses were over. It was not until Sir Alexander had given his hearty approval to the scheme that he remembered to wonder at the eagerness displayed by his son and daughter to go again to Scotland. For Glensheen was a sufficiently dull little place, hemmed in by its own mountains, and far from visitable neighbours, and the Thorolds might

have been expected to have exhausted its natural beauties on their previous visit. But in spite of all this, it possessed great attractions for Thekla and Keith, and what was really a very significant fact—they never spoke of these attractions to each other.

Keith's arrival was the signal for a few little mild dissipations. Stella's life was a busy one, and Thekla had been glad to share her pursuits; and between cottage visiting, night-schools, their own music, and keeping Jack out of any very flagrant mischief, they had little time to feel dull. But they were glad of a little variety, and now came long walks and rides, excursions to carry lunch to Mr. Wincanton and Keith when shooting, a little visiting, a few garden parties at such a distance from home as to seem absurd, until one became accustomed to neighbourliness in a scattered neighbourhood. There was also a good deal of boating, but no picnics in the wood above the cliffs: Stella was too thoughtful to repeat that form of entertainment in the absence of one of last year's guests.

The time passed pleasantly, and all too quickly to one at least of the party, who watched, with a little unacknowledged hope in her heart, each horseman appearing within the gates, and retired each night with a little chill of disappointment that *he* had not come yet, and in spite of hope and disappointment, dreaded nothing so much as his arrival.

And now she had given up both hopes and fears, for Saturday had come, and on Monday Keith and she would leave Glensheen, to return, so far at least as

she was concerned, to the dreary round of home duties. But their visit was destined to be prolonged in an unexpected manner.

"Will you come for a ride with me this morning, Thorold?" Mr. Wincanton said, at breakfast.

"Delighted," Keith replied, after finishing his tea with sufficient deliberation to enable him to concoct a plan for fitting in his host's wishes with his own. "But need the ride be confined to two solitary males? May not Miss Wincanton and Thekla, to say nothing of Jack, be permitted to join the company?"

"If they like——" Mr. Wincanton began dubiously.

"Of course we like," came the laughing response.

"But I propose to go over rather rough ground."

"We don't mind that," Thekla said brightly

"Very well. If anything happens to any of you—a broken neck or two——"

"I'll patch them up," Keith said cheerfully.

"This doctor is determined to make himself well known," Thekla said saucily.

"Better known than respected, perhaps," Keith laughed. "Well, to what outlandish parts are you going to take us, Mr. Wincanton?"

"Do you see the second—no, the third hill out there, a somewhat rugged peak? Just beyond that. I want your opinion."

"On what? It isn't worth much on most subjects."

"On matters geological. You know something about the appearance of a coal-bed, I suppose, and I will show you a spot there where I think we could strike a rich vein."

“Have you tried boring?”

“No. McGrath, my manager, throws a lot of cold water on that, declaring there is nothing to be found but ‘stanes,’ a material for which he has great contempt, and, as it is a case of setting my theory against his practice, he generally contrives to suppress me.”

“And so you want to hurl the opinion of Mr. Thorold, as a scientific gentleman from London (which ranks far above Cambridge as a seat of learning in McGrath’s opinion, Mr. Thorold), against the poor old man’s sturdy reasoning? What a shame, father!” Stella said brightly.

“Mr. Wincanton would probably receive an answer more true than polite respecting ignorant young jackanapes offering opinions on subjects of which they know nothing,” Keith observed quietly. “Ought not your manager to know best, Mr. Wincanton?”

“Of course he ought. He has the necessary experience, and I have not,” Mr. Wincanton said, with new gravity. “I don’t think I knew anything of coal, except as an expensive household requisite, until my uncle died six years ago and left me this place. On the other hand, McGrath has breathed the air of mines for the last forty years or more. But in this case I hope that I am right and that he is wrong.”

Keith wondered at the note of anxiety in his host’s voice, but of course made no comment.

“I think I must have met McGrath in my rambles about the pit’s mouth. Is he a short, dried-up little old man? Then I know him well. But he also knows

me, and I have shown my ignorance on mining matters so palpably that I feel he will never accept my opinion in preference to his own."

"He wouldn't do *that* if you were an archangel specially endowed with mining intelligence," Mr. Wincanton remarked cheerfully "Well, come and see the place. We can discuss it afterwards. Will you all be ready in half an hour? Then ring the bell, Jack, and I will order the horses."

It was a perfect day for riding, bright and clear, with a fresh breeze from the sea; but while the two girls and Jack cantered merrily ahead, Keith felt that some of the perfection was marred by having to ride soberly at Mr. Wincanton's side, and hear his reasons in detail for believing in the existence of this new mine. His attention had wandered a little, perhaps, to the graceful figures and bright voices in front, and Mr. Wincanton may have observed it, for he turned suddenly towards him, laid his hand on the young fellow's arm, and spoke somewhat gravely and impressively.

"I don't suppose mines are a very interesting subject to you, Thorold, but, for all that, I should be glad if you will give me your full attention now."

Keith felt somewhat uncomfortable, and turned with boyish frankness towards his host.

"I beg your pardon. I am afraid I was thinking of something else." "(Some *one* else would have been nearer the mark," he added mentally.)

There was no look of offence in the elder man's equally frank face, but there was some slight embarrassment.

“ I am very anxious to find another mine, Thorold, and if you will listen to a somewhat lengthy tale, I will tell you why. My uncle borrowed a large sum of money years ago to work the Glensheen pit, and instead of forming a company, as other men would, he chose to keep it all in his own hands, arranging to pay the interest and part of the principal of this loan every year. This loan is nearly paid, and the mine has brought us in a good fortune, which I fear we have spent rather recklessly. I was a poor man when my uncle died, and I suddenly found myself a rich one, and ”—in an apologetic voice—“ that sort of change does not teach a man caution.”

“ Rather not,” Keith replied, smiling at the thought of some of the vagaries of college acquaintances under similar circumstances.

“ I think I had a kind of undefined notion that my coal was an inexhaustible supply, and I made no preparations for any emergency. You understand?”

Keith nodded, wondering greatly why he had been selected for this confidence.

“ Well, McGrath tells me that the coal is slowly but surely giving out. We turn out less each week, and there is no indication of a new seam. I hope the old mine will pay off the rest of the debt and give us something over before it fails, but it will not enable me to leave my children such a fortune as I—and—and others—may have expected. This place is settled on Jack, and unless I should find a new mine, there will not be much provision for Stella.”

His embarrassment was now obvious, and Keith understood why he had been told this. The blood rushed hotly to the young man's cheek.

"I don't think," he said, in a low, eager tone, "that the man who could win your daughter would care if your mines never yielded another farthing!"

Some of the glow on his cheek seemed to have spread to his companion's, but the latter did not speak for some moments, and Keith began to fear that he had been presumptuous. But at length Mr. Wincanton looked up, and, with what sounded like a sigh of relief, said slowly—

"I am an older and weaker man than I look, Thorold, and this has been a great anxiety to me lately." Then, with a quick change of tone as they came up to where the others waited doubtfully on the bridle-path along the hill-side, "This is the place. What do you think of it?"

No one spoke for a minute, and then Stella said, with a little irrepressible shiver, "It is the most desolate spot I have ever seen."

And the others thought as she did. It was a desolate place. They stood on a small plateau, and below them the hill shelved rapidly downwards towards a narrow gorge cleft between two steep, rugged hills, in places merely the face of broken rocks overhanging and darkening the valley, all absolutely bare of tree or bush, and but thinly clothed with grass and stunted heather. In the valley itself piles of boulders lay scattered in confusion, some overgrown with lichen

and moss, others with patches of dark earth, showing how lately they had fallen from the heights above. No sheep grazed here, there was not a sound but the shrill cry of a gull circling overhead, and the low, melancholy murmur of the distant sea.

"Mr. Wincanton, it is a dreadful place!" Thekla cried. "Why did you bring us here?"

"Nonsense, my dear. It will be a charming place in the abstract if it makes all our fortunes, and there will be a great relief in the knowledge that here is no beautiful fairy glen, as I remember Glensheen, to be spoilt by smoking chimneys and creaking windlasses."

"There is pleasure in that thought," Keith assented smiling. "Where does the coal lie?"

"Just below us, somewhere near that ledge. Will you dismount, Thorold, and come down with me?"

"Is it not a stiff climb for you?" Keith asked, rather doubtfully.

"I have been there before," Mr. Wincanton replied cheerfully.

"There was heavy rain last night, father," Stella said with some anxiety. "Will it not have loosened the earth?"

"Not enough to affect us. Come along, Thorold."

The ledge was only about twenty feet below, and there were rough steps down the face of the cliff, which rendered the descent fairly easy. Keith sprang lightly down, giving his hand to his companion when any difficulties arose, and the ledge was safely reached. It was a narrow strip of rock, extending to a consider-

able distance, but presenting to Keith's inexperienced eyes no sign of a coal-bed. Mr. Wincanton, however, pointed out eagerly the peculiarities of the sandstone cliff, of which it formed part, and explained that he expected the lode of coal to run downwards into the mountain, demonstrating the means by which the difficulty of reaching the mine would be surmounted.

The young man wished that he could feel as sanguine of success; but it was difficult, standing here on a narrow ledge on the face of the mountain, to imagine the busy scenes of a coal mine, the tall chimneys, the harsh creaking of machinery, the hum of many men's voices, disturbing the solemn stillness of this weird place. He looked up at the grim wall of rock, at the anxious faces of the girls and Jack above him, and shook his head.

"I can't grasp the idea of a mine here, Mr. Wincanton."

"I can," his friend answered hopefully. Geological hammer in hand, he was examining the various inequalities of the ground, seeking some sign to justify his hopes, and following up a ridge of suspicious-looking stone that stood out from the grassy platform, he moved dangerously near to the edge of the little shelf.

"Take care, father! Oh! take care!" came a cry from above.

Keith turned round and added his warning, but it was too late. As Stella had surmised, the heavy rain of the previous night had loosened the soil at the edge, where Mr. Wincanton had incautiously ventured, and

a mass of earth and stones gave way beneath him. He clutched at the treacherous turf, but it afforded no grasp for his hands, and almost before the others could realise what was happening he had disappeared.

Keith sprang forward and looked down. The precipitous face of the cliff stretched down as a sheer wall for about a hundred feet, then came a grassy slope on which Mr. Wincanton had fallen, whether alive or not it was impossible to determine. He did not answer his young friend's hail or the agonised cry of his children above, but lay there motionless and inert. Keith's first thought was how to reach him. The descent of the cliff from this point was impossible, but the rock was broken and irregular a little further along, and would afford him a scanty foothold. He hastened up the rough steps to the plateau overhead.

Stella had dismounted and came to meet him, every trace of colour gone from her face, but wonderfully calm save for the involuntary trembling of her lips.

"Is he alive?" she asked painfully.

"I hope so." He was conscious that his tone did not convey much hope, but the absolute stillness of the figure below had impressed him sadly. "I am going down to see."

"Can you?" she asked, and moving to the edge she gazed downwards, with a shudder that could not be controlled, at the gulf beneath. "You cannot go down there!"

"I can easily," he replied, calmly, pointing out the means by which he intended to descend.

"It would be terribly dangerous," she said slowly. "You must not run such a risk, Mr. Thorold."

"I have climbed down stiffer places than that before now," he replied, as lightly as he could.

She fixed her truthful blue eyes on him as if to read his inmost thoughts. "*It is* dangerous, Mr. Thorold."

He could not deny it, and wisely did not attempt to do so, but he looked at her with a calm resolution that left her no power to oppose him further. "I am going down, Miss Wincanton. Your father needs me at once—delay might be fatal."

For a moment she broke down. "*It is* good of you—God grant you may go in safety!"

He pressed her hand, and then, turning to Thekla and Jack, gave rapid directions with regard to obtaining help.

"Thekla, are you afraid to ride to Glensheen alone?"

"No, indeed," she cried, with a little gasp. She would have faced any number of raging lions or even tipsy tramps just then, if by so doing she might lift any part of Stella's load of anxiety.

"Good girl. Tell them to send the waggonette here at once, with two or three strong, steady men. Have a mattress put in, and these things," and pulling out his pocket-book he wrote a little list of necessaries.

"Jack, do you know where the nearest doctor lives?"

"Yes, at Gorlas. But he's an awful fool," the boy said bluntly.

"Isn't he any good, Miss Wincanton?" with great anxiety.

"Not much," she answered sadly; "there is not a good doctor anywhere near here."

"I wish my father were here," Keith muttered, perhaps for the first time in his life. "Now, Jack, listen. Stay here until I have reached your father, and I will shout out what I wish you to tell the doctor. Then will you ride off at once for him?"

The boy nodded and dried his eyes vigorously.

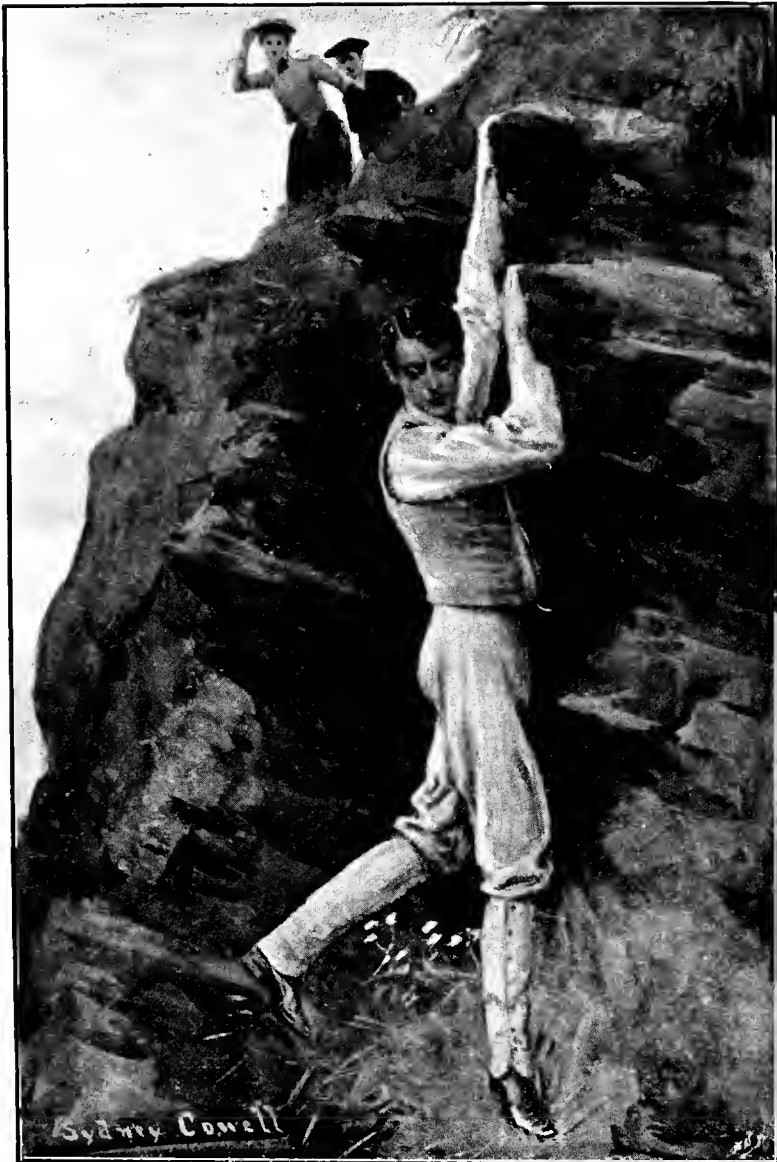
"Is there nothing that I can do?" Stella asked piteously.

The young man looked perplexed: he had wished to spare her, and he now realised that inaction, in such trouble as this, was the most difficult part to play. Thékla had already started on her errand. Jack was best fitted to carry out the other, and yet he knew how terrible it would be for the daughter to wait helplessly for such tidings as he feared he would have to give her. But she interrupted his reflections suddenly, looking up with a brave attempt at a smile.

"I can wait, Mr. Thorold—and pray"

The last words were so low that he could hardly hear them, but they told him whence came the steadfast courage on her face, and he pressed her hand once more encouragingly before throwing off his coat, and commencing his descent.

It was a desperate undertaking, without a rope or any means of assistance, to descend that wall of crumbling stone, but he was a hardy young fellow,



"IT WAS A DESPERATE UNDERTAKING TO DESCEND THAT WALL
OF CRUMBLING STONE."

cool and resolute, active and athletic, and he swung himself from rock to rock, dexterously selecting the next resting-place for hand or foot, and almost without a mishap he reached the grassy slope in safety. Mr. Wincanton lay in the same attitude, and Keith hurried towards him with dismal forebodings.

He lay on his face, his battered hat lying close by, while a pool of blood welled from a wound on his head. Keith turned the inert body, wiped some of the blood off the pallid face, and placed his hand on the breast of the injured man, then he sprang to his feet with a loud, glad shout.

“He is alive ! Alive ! Miss Wincanton, do you hear ?”

“Thank God !” came back distinctly and fervently.

Then Keith knelt again and examined the injuries more closely. There were bruises in many places, the hands were gashed and torn, but the chief source of anxiety was the blow on the head, and the young man understood enough of surgery to realise its danger. This accounted for the deadly stillness of the rigid limbs : it had affected the brain, but how severely he could not yet estimate. He looked up again to shout, this time to Jack.

“Tell the doctor to come at once, and to bring with him——” and then he stopped. What was the use of giving a young boy a list of instruments, of which he would have forgotten the names long before he reached Gorlas ? “Have you a pencil and paper ?” he shouted.

“No,” came back despondently from both Stella and Jack.

Keith looked round hopelessly. He could not climb the mountain again, for his last drop had been from an overhanging rock about a dozen feet above the grassy slope. He could not reach the valley below, for beyond the slope was a precipitous wall, deeper and far less broken than that by which he had already come. He must find some other means of communicating with the waiting boy, for he knew that unless the necessary surgical operation could be performed within a limited number of hours no earthly skill could save his friend's life.

Suddenly a solution of the difficulty entered his mind. He had often thrown a cricket-ball greater distances than that intervening between him and Mr. Wincanton's children. He would find a stone of about the same size and weight, attach to it a pencilled list of necessities, and trust to his old athletic skill to carry it safely. He shouted again, announcing his intentions, and then sought for a suitable stone. He could find none to please him on the slope, and he retraced his steps to the rock and searched there. There were many stones lying at the foot of the cliff too large or too small, too light or too heavy, but at length he found exactly what he wanted—a small piece of some black mineral substance, evidently broken from a great mass of the same material that lay imbedded in the rock. He hastily wrote out what he wanted on a leaf of his pocket-book, tore it out and wrapped it round the stone. His handkerchief had already been used in Mr. Wincanton's service, so he took off his necktie, bound it round his

missile, carefully placing the slip of paper in its folds, and then, retreating to the outside limit of the slope, he prepared to execute the most delicate piece of bowling which he had ever undertaken.

Jack stood ready. The boy was already a capital young cricketer, and could be depended on to "field" this "ball," if not to catch it. The little missile rose straight and true, passed slightly over the heads of the two watchers on the hill, and landed safely in Jack's hand.

"Hurrah!" the boy cried excitedly, and Keith almost echoed his expression of relief, as he saw Jack spring on his pony and ride hastily away.

There was but little that could be done now for the injured man, and the time passed wearily both to Stella and Keith while waiting for the rescuing party from Glensheen. At length the waggonette arrived in the road below the hill, and four strong men, Donald, Mr. Wincanton's servant, a groom, and two gillies hastened up the bridle-path with ropes and a small mattress. Then with infinite care and tenderness they drew their master, and afterwards his young friend, up the rock, and carried the former to the carriage where now Stella awaited them.

She shuddered, but did not cry out at the sight of the blood-stained face and rigid limbs, and with resolute calmness she seated herself on the floor of the waggonette, and directed them to lay her father's head in her lap. Then the long, slow drive commenced, and Keith marvelled at the courage and fortitude with which she went through it.

The doctor met them almost at the door of Glensheen House, but he disappointed the clever young student terribly. He proved to be an ignorant, obstinate old man, whose science had been learnt fifty years before in an apothecary's shop, and after a long argument with him Keith groaned and wished once more for his father's presence.

"That old idiot will let your father die for want of a simple operation," he said wrathfully to Stella. "Is there no one else?"

"Not nearer than A——," she answered dejectedly.

He consulted time-tables hurriedly. "They could not be here in time. Ah! I know—Dr. Grimshaw is staying with the Macdonalds for the shooting. Jack, ride off to Gorlas and send this telegram. He might be here to-night!"

But twenty-four hours elapsed before Dr. Grimshaw could reach Glensheen, and then, after an exhaustive examination of his patient, he took Keith downstairs, seized his hand, and worked it up and down like a pump-handle.

"Capital, my boy, capital! You're your father's son! I couldn't have done it better myself!"

Keith coloured with pleasure. "I should have left the operation for you, sir, but the pressure appeared to be so great that I dared not allow it to go on any longer."

"Quite right! quite right! As I told you, I was away, and did not get back until this morning. Well, your patient would have been dead by this time if you had waited for me!" A little gasp of horror warned

him that he had another listener, and he turned quite cheerfully to Stella. "Fact, Miss Wincanton. But he'll do now—yes, yes, he'll do very well. You owe his life to my young friend here. They teach them something at Cambridge, you see, although it's contrary to the general impression. But," turning again to Keith, "do you mean to tell me that the local man couldn't perform the operation?"

"He wouldn't," Keith answered, with a smile. "He said it was murder, and would hardly lend me his tools."

"I'd have it out *manslaughter* if I had found the patient dead for want of it!" the London surgeon spluttered angrily. "But you've begun well, sir, you've begun well! You may tell your father from me to be proud of you. Now, Miss Wincanton, I must tell you one thing, which probably my young friend has told you already. Your father must have absolute silence in his room—not so much as a whisper, remember, until he speaks rationally, and perfect absence of worry and excitement afterwards. You won't forget? No, thought not. Good-bye. Good-bye, Thorold," and the kindly little man bustled away, on the creaky boots that somehow never creaked in a sick-room, and always did outside.





CHAPTER VII.

KEITH'S INVESTMENT.



OW do you think he is to-day, Mr. Thorold?"

"Better, improving daily, in fact."

"I am so thankful—dear father!"

There was a slight pause, and then she asked quickly, "You don't think him well enough to attend to any business yet?"

"I doubt if he could understand it, and it would be most unwise to try."

"I thought so," with a sigh. "I wish I knew what to do?"

"What is the trouble—anything I can arrange?"

"I hardly understand myself. McGrath is most anxious to see my father, and says it is imperative that some cheque should be sent."

"I am sure that could be easily arranged," he said kindly. "May I see McGrath, and find out what is the matter?"

"Oh, thank you!" she answered, with tears in her eyes. "How good you are to us!"

"Am I?" he said, with the odd little smile that she had sometimes noticed before, and he turned away with the conviction that he must often miss opportunities of helping her, since "minding her business," as well as Thekla's, seemed to be always one and the same thing as furthering his own interests.

He found the old manager in Mr. Wincanton's library, but it was no easy thing to overcome his cautious distrust of strangers and induce any confidence. When, however, he had at length convinced McGrath that his employer could not be approached on any matter of business, but that he, Keith, was ready to undertake the full responsibility of any action, the old man's reserve broke down.

"'Deed an' I'm glad there's ony one to tak' the reesponsibilitiee of onything," he said shrewdly, "for it's no' a task I care for mysel'!"

"Nor I," smiled Keith. "But Miss Wincanton has quite enough to trouble her without adding to her burden."

"'Deed an' she has, puir lassie," the old man said warmly. "But I'm no' sure that ye can do ony guid."

And he then proceeded to explain to Keith that his trouble was about the repayment and interest of the loan of which Mr. Wincanton had spoken. The yearly payment was due, and must be made, or certain pains and penalties would fall on the owner of the mine.

"Surely that can be easily arranged. Cannot you

see the banker, who must know Mr. Wincanton's condition, and arrange for cheques to be drawn in your name or Miss Wincanton's, until her father is able to attend to business?"

The old man shook his head sadly. "If that was a', sir, I've no doot it might be done, with proper sureties, ye ken? But," dropping his voice and looking round suspiciously to make sure that there were no other listeners, "there's mair than that to conseeder."

"How?" asked Keith, startled more by his manner than his words.

With much feeling the old man explained. It was in no way Mr. Wincanton's fault, the gentleman must quite understand that, but the mine had not been doing well for some little time. The output covered little more than outgoing expenses and the household expenses at Glensheen, and very little had been set aside to meet this heavy drain. If Mr. Wincanton had been well, he could have easily arranged an overdraft at the bank, to be repaid in better times, but no one else could transact the necessary business.

Keith saw the gravity of the situation, and suggested making a full explanation of the circumstances to the person to whom the money was owing, but it transpired that such a plan would be disastrous to Mr. Wincanton's credit. The debt had been bought up from the original lender by a rival mine-owner, with the avowed intention of causing the owner of Glensheen as much annoyance as was possible, and indeed the obnoxious creditor was a person so little to be

relied on that a trustworthy agent, generally McGrath himself, had to be despatched with the money on the occasion of each payment, to receive the formal receipt.

"Is there no one who could manage this for Mr. Wincanton?" Keith asked. "No lawyer or business friend?"

"Aye, maybe the law-agents in Edinburgh might manage it. I'd no' thought o' they," gazing with evident and open admiration at the young man. "I'll gang straight through to Edinburgh at once, though how they'll fend at th' pit wi'oot me, I dinna just ken."

"Wouldn't a letter do as well?"

"Mon, the siller's got to be paid this week, and yon thief that's to hae it is awa' in France!"

This was an unanswerable argument, and Keith whistled. "You had better start at once," he said, in some dismay.

Very much comforted by the new suggestion, the old manager departed, and meeting Stella in the hall, he volunteered the information that "yon callant" must have plenty of brains, and was a good, kind lad besides—an opinion to which she offered no contradiction.

Keith watched for the manager's return in some anxiety, notwithstanding the hopefulness with which he had seen him depart, but he was not prepared for the face of hopeless, perplexed misery that was turned on him when he entered the library again to greet him.

"Eh, mon," the old man groaned, "they law-agents are just either thieves theirsel's or fules!"

With some difficulty, due to McGrath's indignation

with the highly respectable firm whose help he had sought, Keith extracted an account of the interview, but all the argument resolved itself into one conclusive sentence—the lawyers could do nothing without Mr. Wincanton's authority.

“Can I no' see the laird for one meenit, sir?” McGrath asked piteously. “Just long eno' to sign a wee bit paper, to gie me authority to act?”

“It might cost him his life or his reason, McGrath,” the young man said sadly, but firmly. “We must think of something better than that. What's the sum that must be paid?”

“Eleven hundred and three poonds eight shillings and three pence,” replied the old man, with an accuracy that betokened constant mental repetition.

“And what have you got towards it?”

“Three hundred poonds, and maybe the odd poonds, shillings, and pence.”

“My word!” Keith said quickly. “Eight hundred missing. What's the balance in the bank, McGrath?”

“Maybe twa hundred poonds; but they'll no' let us hae it.”

“Then you must find eight hundred pounds before to-morrow, and we haven't power to raise a penny in Mr. Wincanton's name!” He walked about the room in some agitation. “And those fools of lawyers will allow that dear old man and that poor girl to be ruined rather than act without authority! Did you say I'd go bail, or whatever the proper term is, McGrath?”

“Aye, sir, and they said they didna ken ye frae

Adam, and how s'uld they ken what guid your security might be?" wrathfully.

"Well, that's true enough," Keith said moodily. "But it doesn't help matters. There must be some one to whom you can go, McGrath? I wish my father were at home." ("That's the second time within a week," mentally.) "Why, what a fool I am, McGrath! I can do it myself. I have a thousand pounds lying in the bank now—my poor mother's money—waiting for reinvestment. We'll invest it in Mr. Wincanton's affairs for the present at all events. Why, man, what's the matter with you?" For the old man had flung himself into a chair, laid his head on the table, and was sobbing like a child.

"It's nought, sir—the relief an' a' that! May God bless ye for the relief ye've gi'en me this day! My heart's been just fit to break wi' th' thought of the laird dishonoured maybe, and the dear lassie and Master Jack brought to grief!"

Keith looked apprehensively at the door. "Shut up, McGrath, this won't do, you know! Miss Wincanton will hear you and come in—or my sister, which would be almost as bad a predicament. Come, now, let's return to business. If I give you the cheque, can you get the money in London, and take it over to this elderly ruffian?"

"That I canna, sir. There's something wrong wi' the pit, and I maun be here to see to it."

"Whom can you send, then?"

The old man reflected for some moments.

“ I dinna ken, sir.”

“ I would go myself, but I don't like leaving Mr. Wincanton. I don't know, though—Dr. Grimshaw comes to-morrow with a doctor from Edinburgh, and so I could be better spared. I should have liked to hear their opinion, but this is more important, and I can hear the opinion second-hand. All right, McGrath. Get the papers together, and the odd hundred and three pounds—not forgetting the shillings and pence! Keep the other two hundred back—it might be wanted by Miss Wincanton if anything went wrong. I'll start by the night mail this evening. And now remember, McGrath, don't say a word about this to any one, especially Miss Wincanton.”

But as he went upstairs again towards the sick-room, he felt rather uneasy at this apparent desertion of his friend, and wondered how she would take it. She had been listening for his step on the stairs, and came out to meet him.

“ Has McGrath been able to make matters right, Mr. Thorold? ”

“ Quite right, I hope,” he replied, with an astonished admiration of his own powers of acting.

She looked much relieved. “ He seemed so anxious about it that he quite frightened me. Was it anything very serious? ”

“ It was rather awkward not to be able to have your father's signature for some matters of business,” he answered, as boldly as he could.

“ Then how has he managed? He said you had suggested something.”

"Nothing more startling than a visit to your father's lawyers in Edinburgh, Miss Wincanton."

"Is that all? I was afraid he might have to sell part of the property or something. He said he must have a large sum of money."

Keith smiled. "No one could sell your father's property but himself," he said, with so quiet an air of conviction that no one could have believed that he had despatched Mr. Wincanton's manager to Edinburgh, with instructions as to carrying out almost as startling an interference in Mr. Wincanton's affairs.

She looked up somewhat wistfully. "I am sorry I do not know more about business. I have often wished to be able to help my father, when I have seen him troubled."

"He would not wish that?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Has he spoken to you yet?" Keith asked suddenly, determined to get his unpleasant duty over at once.

"Only a few words—disjointed words chiefly, but just now he mentioned your name distinctly."

"I thought he knew me this morning. I wish—I don't like leaving him, Miss Wincanton, but I have to go to London to-night." It all came out with a rush.

"Oh!" She could not restrain the little cry of distress. "Must you go? But of course you must—you have been very, *very* kind in staying so long."

"Don't——" he cried, almost harshly, and then looked at her eagerly. Dare he tell her what pleasure it was to do anything for her—what pain to leave her?

No, this was no fit time, and recovering herself with an effort, he glanced at the half-closed door.

“Do you think he can spare me for a few days? Grimshaw and the other man will be here to-morrow ”

“Oh! are you coming back?” She turned away that he might not see the eager look in her eyes, and he only heard the careful indifference of her voice.

“Certainly, if I may,” he answered coldly, chilled by her manner.

“We shall be—you know how glad!” she said, with a sudden catch in her voice. And before he could speak, she had hurried into her father’s room, and noiselessly closed the door.





CHAPTER VIII.

MISCHIEF.



KEITH, my dear boy, I don't know that I was ever more gratified in my life."

"At what, father?"

"You, my boy" Sir Alexander's tone was quite cordial, and the pressure of his hand affectionate.

"Very glad to hear it. What is it all about? Taking my medical degree? That's an old story, and I can't pretend that my thesis contained anything original, and I had to take the degree some time or other."

"Not that, of course," his father said, almost irritably. "But I met Grimshaw to-day for a moment, and he congratulated me most heartily on your treatment of Mr. Wincanton's case."

Keith's face had flushed, and he looked pleased. "It is very kind of him, but I think he makes too much of a simple operation."

"It wasn't a simple operation at all," Thekla put in, with much determination. "Stella told me that Dr. Grimshaw told her that you had saved her father's life."

"She told the sexton, and the sexton tolled the bell," Keith remarked, with ludicrous gravity, but the colour in his cheeks deepened.

"Why did you not tell me that, Thekla?" her father demanded suddenly.

"I did not think you would care," she replied casually.

"What?" His face grew purple, and he had to put a severe restraint upon himself to prevent a very angry answer. "Pray, was that your reason for not mentioning the occurrence to me?" he turned to his son with icy politeness.

It was the tone Thekla most dreaded, and Keith saw her shrink and quiver. He put his arm round her with a kindly, affectionate impulse, and looked smilingly at his father.

"Not altogether," he answered lightly. "I am really a modest young fellow (although few people give me credit for it), and I couldn't get a long trumpet, and bray out all Mr. Wincanton's and Dr. Grimshaw's civilities at the corner of the street."

Sir Alexander looked somewhat mollified. "Grimshaw tells me you conducted a very delicate and dangerous operation with great skill, and I was obliged to confess that I had heard nothing of it. What was it?"

In a few words Keith described the technical details of the case, and his father listened with much interest.

“It was a delicate operation, especially considering the age of the patient. I am astonished that you ventured to undertake it alone.”

“I wouldn’t if there had been any one else to do it, but I knew that Grimshaw could not be there in time. I was never in such a *blue funk* in my life!”

His father had an intense dislike of slang terms, but he smiled indulgently at Keith’s boyish remark, and held out his hand. “I congratulate you, my boy.”

“Thank you, father.” And Keith felt the strong sympathy of the elder man in that handshake; but he was glad to have a reasonable excuse for leaving the room and escaping further praise.

“It is odd,” Sir Alexander remarked musingly. “The lad told me he hated practical surgery and loathed sick people, and yet he voluntarily undertook a difficult and dangerous bit of surgery, and gave up half his vacation to nursing a sick man. I can’t understand him.”

Thekla looked up with sudden daring playfulness. “I can, father. I think the reason was that he regarded Mr. Wincanton as *Stella’s* father, and not as a sick man.”

“Nonsense!” her father said irritably; then as Thekla remained silent, he continued sharply, “What makes you say that? Has he said anything to you about it?”

“Oh! no.”

“What, then? Has the girl?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you must be mistaken,” with an accent of relief.

“I don’t think so. Father, you would not mind—would you? You could not help loving Stella.”

“Pshaw! what’s that to do with it? You think”—with an anxious, earnest glance at her under his thick, heavy, white eyebrows—“that all this was devotion to a mere girl, not love of his work?”

If she had not feared her father’s anger she would have laughed at the question. This contemptuous comparison between love and work was very amusing to the sage of nineteen.

“Keith really does love his work,” she said meditatively

“You think so? Why?” with more pleasure.

“The way he speaks of it,” somewhat vaguely, “his delight in his microscope and experiments, and all that sort of thing.”

“The old story—mere theory. I want to see him a practical doctor.”

“Oh! that will come in time,” she said confidently, with an unconscious imitation of Kenneth’s manner that would have been ludicrous to a more acute listener than Sir Alexander.

“H’m! I wish I were as sure of it. Well, well, tell me about this girl.” And with little trace of his former displeasure he drew from her particulars of Stella’s disposition, family, and fortune, and finally

heaved a deep sigh. "I suppose it must have come some time. I hope she is worthy of my boy."

His words were a revelation to Thekla, and she looked at the cold, impassive face with increased liking and respect.

"Thank you, my dear," he said absently, only conscious that she was lingering in the room; "that will do—you may go."

It was the formula with which she had so often been dismissed in the days of her childhood, and a little sob rose in her throat. "I wonder," she said to herself as she left the room, "if I loved my father as Stella loves hers, should I hate Keith?"

Even more astonishing than his geniality of the morning was Sir Alexander's conduct that afternoon. His patients scarcely knew him. There was a pleasant kindness in his manner strangely unlike his customary cold hauteur, and an absent-mindedness and nervous haste even more unusual. Directly he could rush through his work he drove to the City, interviewed an acquaintance there, and then hurried to Dr. Grimshaw's house, where he greeted his friend warmly and eagerly.

The fussy little doctor received him with pleasure.

"Ah! you've come to talk about your boy? Thought so. Well, I can understand it. I never had a child of my own, and, upon my word, I've often been glad I hadn't, when I've seen fellows of my own standing worried to death with sons' college and gambling debts and daughters' dressmaking bills! But I should like such a son as yours, Thorold."

Sir Alexander smiled grimly. "So would a good many other people. But you guessed rightly, Grimshaw—I come to ask you about my boy."

And then followed a long discussion, professional and otherwise.

"Well, there's no hurry; he has plenty of time before him," Dr. Grimshaw said, as the other rose to leave. "I took a great fancy to the lad, and was quite sorry to miss him at Homburg?"

"At Homburg?"

"Yes. I went there almost immediately after seeing Mr. Wincanton again. But your son had left Scotland before I did, and all I saw of him at Homburg was leaving the station as I arrived."

"Keith has not been there this year. It must be a mistake."

"No mistake at all," somewhat irritably "He had been at my hotel; I saw his name in the visitors' list—'K. Thorold.' There's no mistaking your stiff Thorold signature. Besides, I asked the hotel clerk, who described him accurately. I was uncommonly sorry to miss him, for there wasn't a soul there worth talking to, and I never allow myself to lose more than five pounds at the tables, and—just my luck—I lost that the first night."

"Why should you lose five pounds at all?" Sir Alexander said sharply.

"Well, it doesn't make me bankrupt," with a shrug of the shoulders, "and one must do as the Romans, &c."

"I don't see the necessity. Gambling is a vice for which I have the greatest contempt," Sir Alexander said sternly.

"Very sorry, sir—won't do it again before next time," the other said humbly, and both laughed.

"I beg your pardon, Grimshaw; I forgot whom I was treating to a lecture."

"All right; do me good some day, perhaps. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. I am very glad you appreciate my boy."

"And you, too, you log of good old tough Scots fir!" the little man said mentally, as he shut the door. "If you would only expose half the good there is in that heart of yours you would be a much more popular man. Does he keep up that stiffness at home, I wonder? If so, it must be bad for that boy and the pretty little girl. Hullo! I hope I haven't put my foot into it by mentioning that little visit to Homburg. The boy had evidently said nothing about it to his father. I should be sorry to make trouble between them."

But it was too late to remedy matters. The words could not be unsaid, and they rankled in Sir Alexander's mind during his drive homewards.

"Could it have been a fact, or was Grimshaw mistaken? Keith would not have gone there without telling me, unless—no, nonsense, he is not that sort of lad! Self-willed, a bit obstinate, perhaps, but nothing more!"

But, despite these conclusions, Sir Alexander watched his son with some anxiety during dinner.

That calm, self-possessed face certainly showed no sign of the feverish anxiety peculiar to young men conscious of a damaging secret; but the father knew that Keith had marvellous powers of self-control, and that this was no infallible test, and as he arrived at this uncomfortable conclusion he caught a few words of the conversation passing between Keith and Thekla which tended to confirm his worst fears.

"Of course you were not there," Thekla was saying, evidently with reference to some reminiscence of her Scotch visit; "it was the week you were away. You went away the day before Dr. Grimshaw came with the Edinburgh doctor, didn't you?"

"Yes," rather shortly.

"I think the dear old man was quite vexed to find you gone, Keith."

"You were not at Glensheen during the whole of your absence from home, Keith?" his father asked suddenly, with an anxiety that was quite inexplicable to his hearers.

"No, I was away for four or five days."

"Shooting?"

"No."

Sir Alexander was about to say more, when he seemed to remember Thekla's presence, and curbed himself. But directly the meal could be pronounced over, he rose from the table, and gave a short, anxious sigh.

"Keith, I want to speak to you this evening. Will you come into my study?"

“Certainly.” The son emptied his glass with a steady hand and unmoved countenance, and followed his father without further remark.

“I have a good deal to say to you about—your future life, and other matters,” Sir Alexander said, with unusual hesitation, as Keith took a seat near the orderly writing-table; “but first—— Come in!” as a knock came at the door.

It was a servant with letters—one for Sir Alexander, which he opened at once, and one for Keith, who glanced at the handwriting, and, with a tender little smile, slipped the unopened envelope into his pocket. Stella’s letters, even when merely written at her father’s dictation, were too sacred to be read before another person.

“This is very satisfactory,” Sir Alexander remarked, laying down his letter. “I saw Williams, the stock-broker who manages my business, to-day about selling out some stocks, and I happened to mention that money of yours which you wished to reinvest. He told me of an excellent opportunity—a big firm in the City turning their business into a company, and promised to find out if he could get a few shares for you. He now writes that he can manage a thousand pounds—just the amount of your little fortune. He speaks very well of it, and prophesies a safe eight per cent. You can depend on his word,” he went on, noticing Keith’s silence with astonishment.

“No doubt,” Keith said, hurriedly; “it is very kind of you and of him.” He felt bewildered.

He had never contemplated such a possibility as this, and he did not know how to answer his father; for Mr. Wincanton had not yet been told of the loan, an expression of anxiety having been silenced by the answer that McGrath had managed the matter, and by the production of the receipt. Keith knew that if there had been any favourable account of the mine to give him, McGrath would have written, and he had heard nothing.

For a moment he thought of telling his father everything; then he remembered that he might do injury to Mr. Wincanton's affairs, and resolved to say nothing until he had his friend's permission to explain all.

"I suppose there is no hurry about the investment," he said, with an attempt to speak lightly

"Of course there is. Do you suppose this kind of opportunity comes every day? Williams tells me there is a perfect rush for these shares. You must write to-night giving him instructions."

"I can't do that," Keith said quietly.

"You cannot do it? Why not?"

"Because I have already invested the money," Keith said desperately, "and I cannot call it up at a moment's notice."

Sir Alexander wheeled round suddenly and faced his son, leaning forward to scan every feature of Keith's embarrassed face. For a moment there was absolute silence, then the father's face grew livid, the lines about his eyes and mouth deepened, and a furious

light shone from the dark eyes under the heavy, white brows. He clenched his fist and brought it down with intense violence on the table, and shouted out two sharp, short words—

“ You liar ! ”

Keith sprang to his feet, his own eyes flashing, his face white with sudden fury.

“ What do you mean ? ” he cried.

“ Liar ! ” his father repeated hoarsely.

All the fury so carefully restrained under his apparent calmness burst out in Keith now, and with clenched fists and gasping breath he advanced towards his father.

“ How dare you ? How dare you ? ” he cried. “ No man—neither my father or any other—shall say such a thing to me ! ”

But Sir Alexander’s violence had subsided, and he rose and stood facing his son with a new, solemn dignity.

“ Silence, Keith. You must know what it costs me to say this to *you*—but is it not true ? You have used that money, or part of it—your mother’s money—for gambling.”

“ I have not ! ” Keith thundered back.

“ Not at Homburg ? ”

“ Neither at Homburg or anywhere else.”

“ Where is the money, then ? Where have you *invested* it ? ” with a cutting emphasis on the word.

“ I cannot tell you.”

“ You cannot tell me ? ” with sharp pain in his voice,

“No, I cannot—I have not the right to tell you. Father, what does this mean? Of what do you accuse me?”

“I have told you—gambling.”

“This is absurd,” Keith retorted. “I tell you on my word of honour that I have never gambled since I was a lad of seventeen, when I lost twenty pounds—that cured me of gambling.”

His father looked at him with intense sadness. “I am an old man, Keith, but I would give ten years of my life to be able to believe you.”

“You doubt me still?”

“I do.”

Keith bit his lip until he could trust himself to speak, and then he said, with great defiance, “If you will not accept my word of honour, there is nothing more to be said.” And he turned to leave the room.

“Stop!” his father said, and Keith faced round to him again. Pride and affection were struggling fiercely in Sir Alexander’s breast, but the latter gained the victory, and the old man’s voice softened. “My boy, come here. I must know more of this before you leave me. Tell me all.”

Keith looked at him proudly and resentfully. “I have nothing to tell you, since you refuse to accept my word.”

“Give me some proof,” his father said, almost pleadingly. “Tell me where you were during those few days when you left your sister in Scotland.”

“Ha!” Keith cried angrily. “I did not know that

my movements had been so closely watched. What do you suppose I shall say? I am ready enough to admit that I came to London to draw out the money, and took it with me to France; but I cannot tell you that I gambled it away in Paris or Homburg, or anywhere else—nor can your informant, whoever he may be!”

“Keith, Keith! if you can tell me so much, tell me all! I cannot forgive you while you withhold all that is most important from me.”

“I do not want your forgiveness,” Keith replied hotly. “Whatever my faults and failings may be, I am innocent of this—I am neither a gambler nor a liar! But until you come to me and say that you believe me—aye, and beg my pardon for your injustice, although you are my father—I hope never to see or speak to you again. Then I will forgive you—not before.” And with bold, defiant step and his head proudly erect, he left the room.

He went up to the drawing-room, where Thekla sat at the piano, softly playing over some of his favourite pieces. She sprang up as he opened the door.

“Oh, Keith! I am so glad you have come up. You have been such a long time down there, and I thought I heard your voice and father’s too—quite loud and angry. Dear,” she added hastily, noticing his white face and burning eyes, “what is the matter? You look so strange——”

“Do I?” He laughed a little. “Perhaps. My father and I have disagreed, Thekla, and so seriously that it will take a lot of medicine to heal the soreness.”

"Oh, Keith!—my dear, dear Keith!"

"Don't, Thekla," he cried hoarsely. "Don't cry, little girl, or I don't how I shall leave you."

"You are going away, Keith?" with a cry of utter dismay.

"Yes, dear, until—until my father begs my pardon."

She recoiled, and an expression of hopeless dejection came over her face.

"*He* beg your pardon! Oh, Keith, darling, don't go—don't go—it will be for ever!"

"My dear little one, I must."

"Then take me too," very piteously.

"I wish I could; but that would not be right either to you or my father. Your place is here, dear."

"I can't bear it!" she wailed. "First Kenneth—and now you—I cannot bear it."

And through all Keith's wrath and bitterness and self-pity her words stung him like a whip. "First Kenneth—and then you!" What had he done that day by the burn, when he interfered between his little sister and his cousin? And was the mischief irrevocable?

Keith Thorold carried a heavy heart from his father's house that night; but Thekla's was even heavier. She tried to intercede with Sir Alexander, but he was too hurt and angry to listen to her arguments, sternly silencing her. As miserable as on the day of her mother's funeral, she shut herself up in her own room, more lonely than ever.



CHAPTER IX.

THE VILLAGE DOCTOR.



HY, Thorold! This is an unexpected pleasure."

"You may not say so when you know why I have come," Keith replied in his most quiet, even tones.

The elder man pressed his hand warmly "Whatever the cause, the welcome would be the same, I trust."

"It is like you to say so."

"I think I owe you some gratitude," his friend said, with a smile. "You saved my life, and nursed me with the devotion of a son——"

"Please don't talk of sons or fathers," Keith interrupted, his brow lowering and mouth slightly quivering.

"You are in trouble of some kind, Thorold?" Mr. Wincanton said quietly.

"Yes, I am." Keith drew a long breath. "I have

quarrelled with my father—partly through his unfounded suspicions, partly, I fear, through my own obstinacy—and I have practically left his house for good.”

“What? I don’t understand—of what could he suspect you?”

“Of gambling and lying,” Keith said, with a harsh little laugh.

“You! Keith Thorold a gambler and a liar? I don’t believe it!” The old man looked keenly and searchingly into the face of the young one, and then held out his hand with a smile. “I don’t need your assurance that it is not true.”

“Thank you,” Keith said, in a voice that shook in spite of his efforts to keep it steady.

“But your father thinks this? Why, he must be mad, Thorold! Cannot you convince him of his folly?”

Keith shook his head. “He isn’t open to conviction.”

“He can’t believe it—it is monstrous!” incredulously.

“I am glad that *you* don’t.”

“I would as willingly believe little Jack capable of it. Cannot I help you to set this matter right?”

There was a strong impulse on Keith’s part to remark quietly, “My dear sir, you and your manager could destroy the whole fabrication in ten minutes.” It was with the idea of letting one of them communicate with his father that he had come to Glensheen, but his intentions had undergone a complete alteration since he had passed within the familiar gates.

There was an indefinable change in the place since

he had last seen it, and his observant eye told him that it was more than the natural change between the effects of glorious September and gloomy November. The garden wore a strange air of neglect, unswept leaves lay on the lawns, weeds had shot up in the flower-beds and even on the gravel paths. The gorgeous footmen had disappeared, and the door was opened by Mr. Wincanton's own attendant, an old and devoted servant, who had answered Keith's inquiries in a melancholy, depressing manner. But all these slight irregularities might have been attributed merely to the absence of the master's eye had it not been for the alteration in the master himself. Keith had left him ill indeed, but with the hopeful buoyancy of returning health; now he gazed pitifully at the thin, careworn face, the feebleness of the once stalwart frame, and read a new meaning in the deep lines on the brow and the strained anxiety in the eyes. Keith made a sudden resolution: until he had seen McGrath and ascertained the present position of his friends, he would suffer any pain and loss through his father's unjust suspicions, rather than bring possible inconvenience and trouble on the owner of the Glensheen mine by a precipitate revelation of the true state of affairs.

And therefore he said firmly, "No one could set us right now, Mr. Wincanton. Too much has been said, and too little trust shown, for any reconciliation between us."

"My dear boy, I am very, very sorry. I wish I could help you in any way."

"You can if you like," Keith said, a new idea entering his brain. "I would rather ask you, who trust me, than risk refusal from some one who might not care to accept my bare word."

"It will be a favour to me, Thorold, if you will let me help you," Mr. Wincanton said heartily.

"Thank you again." Keith looked up frankly. "Now will you do in earnest what we once talked of in jest—lend me the little house in the village, and establish me as doctor to Glensheen."

"But, Thorold——"

"I think I know what your objections will be. Please let me speak out first. I possess just—ahem—nothing a year of my own, and I would not accept a farthing from my father even if he should offer it—which isn't likely," with an angry little laugh, "therefore I must earn my living. I have all the necessary certificates, and a few more, and I could doctor the village better than that venerable blockhead from Gorlas."

"Couldn't be worse," muttered his host. "I heard of your pitched battle over my inanimate form."

"Hector's body wasn't in it," laughed Keith.

"But this is all nonsense, Thorold. You can't bury your talents in a wretched little mining village, where you would never make a decent living."

Keith laughed bitterly. "I must have a living of some kind, decent or otherwise, and if I went round Great Britain offering my services as assistant to any respectable medical practitioner in need of one, it is

probable that the aforesaid respectable medical practitioner would fight shy of an individual whom his own father had kicked out-of-doors."

Mr. Wincanton sat for some moments in silence, revolving some knotty problem in his mind, and then spoke anxiously. "Thorold, you must allow me to propose a far better plan. My dear boy, I owe you a debt that I can never repay, and may I not ask you to accept a sufficient sum to buy a practice?"

Keith could scarcely repress a smile at the unconscious irony of this remark, but he regarded it in the same light in which it was made—an offer of help from a man himself in far from prosperous circumstances—and he leant forward with his pleasant, frank smile and heartiest thanks. "I know you would always be ready to help me, but I can't do that."

"As a fee, Thorold, and an inadequate one? As a loan?"

"Neither as one nor the other, but I thank you most truly for the kind thought. And," smiling again, but with an undercurrent of earnestness beneath the light words, "you don't think me too black a sheep to introduce into your village?"

"You know me better, Keith Thorold," was the only reply.

"Then you will let me come here?"

"I don't know what to say. It is a sheer waste of your time and energies——"

"For which, unfortunately, there is no great demand elsewhere!"

“There is Dr. Grimshaw——”

“My father’s closest friend. I wouldn’t ask him.”

“All the more reason why you should. He could put matters straight with your father at once. The whole thing is so preposterous that any one less angry than you probably were could explain it away without difficulty. What induced your father to make this charge against you?”

“Upon my word, I hardly know,” Keith admitted candidly. “By some means my father has become firmly impressed with the belief that I have been to Homburg this summer, and lost money there.”

“But you were here all the summer——”

“I was away for nearly a week, during which time I appear to have fallen into evil ways with a vengeance.”

“But you were not at Homburg?”

“No,” with a smile.

“Then you can easily prove to him where you were, and what you were doing.”

“I could certainly prove where I was easily enough, but that would not establish the fact that I had not been gambling.”

“Your bank-book would.”

“Unfortunately that would be dead against me, for I spent a large sum of money in that week. Does that admission destroy your faith in me?” bitterly.

“I consider your word of honour stronger evidence,” Mr. Wincanton replied quietly.

“Thank you,” Keith murmured, with real emotion. “It is worth something to have a friend who will trust

me when my own father will not." Then his anger overcame him again, and he walked restlessly about the room. "Liar and gambler! He could not have struck me a harder blow, and he shall never have the opportunity of striking another!"

"When your anger and his have cooled a little——" Mr. Wincanton began.

"Never!" Keith cried hotly. "I'll run no risks of further insults."

"You're a wilful lad—very," his friend said, smiling sadly.

"I am afraid so. Well, am I to do what I wish in Glensheen?"

"Of course you will—you always do. But I know you will regret it hereafter. However, I won't oppose your plans. You can begin to doctor the miners when you like."

"Or, rather, when *they* like," Keith corrected. "Thank you, Mr. Wincanton."

"For what? Allowing you to act against all the principles of prudence and common sense?"

"No, for letting me look forward to some definite means of livelihood."

"Such a livelihood! What do you suppose they will pay you?"

"In kind, perhaps—lumps of coal. Now as physician to the village, I must start on the laird. How are you now?"

"Pretty well," with rather a dreary smile. "I shall not be about for some time yet, I fear." And a dis-

cussion on the subject of health followed, lasting until the arrival of the melancholy servant.

"Ah! time to get ready for dinner? Very well, Donald. Give me your arm. Is Miss Wincanton in?"

She came in as he left the room, her hat still on her head and gloves in her hand. The library was already dim with the fading light, and she scarcely recognised the figure by the window. "Who is it? Mr. Thorold!" with a glad start and bright glow on her cheeks. "When did you come? Is Thekla with you?"

"No, she is in London."

The little light that there was fell on his face as he took her hand, and she saw the grave, troubled expression of his eyes, the only features that were not under control.

"There is something the matter," she cried quickly. "Does my father feel worse—has he sent for you?"

"No, indeed. I came to him to help me."

"Then *you* are in trouble. Is it Thekla? Oh! what?"

"I should not be here if anything were wrong with her," he said smiling. "I wanted Mr. Wincanton's advice."

Somewhat reassured, she looked up brightly. "Have you taken it? I thought not. But," with a return of her fears, "you have come nearly four hundred miles to ask father's advice? It must be about something very serious."

He laughed again, a bitter, angry little laugh, and related what had happened.

"How dare your father suspect you?" she cried indignantly. "How could he? But, Mr. Thorold, forgive me—you must put aside your pride, and make him see the right. Oh! I am sure it is only some misunderstanding that could easily be explained. You must not continue to quarrel with him."

"Why not?"

"Because it is wrong, and because you love each other too much."

"Love! Do you think he loves me? Do you believe I love him?"

"I know it."

"How? Thekla never told you so?" sarcastically.

"No, but you tell me so now, by your grief in this quarrel."

"My grief?" with a mocking laugh.

"Yes, I can hear it even through that laugh," she said earnestly. "You would not be so angry with him if you did not care greatly "

"That's a new way of explaining hatred and malice."

"I did not mention hatred or malice, Mr. Thorold."

"What, then?" She looked so pretty with her flushed face, and the eager eyes with their suspicion of tears, that he would not leave off teasing her.

"I see you want to provoke me into it," she said, with a little smile.

"Which—love or anger?" he asked audaciously.

She saw too late the trap into which she had fallen, and flushed hotly. "I can't think how you can jest

on such a subject," she said steadily. "Cannot my father do anything to put matters right? What does Thekla say?"

"Poor little Thekla! She tried peacemaking, and received snubs from both parties—the usual reward in this erring world. And I have left her broken-hearted, poor little girl!" with real feeling in his voice, "and very lonely. Miss Wincanton," suddenly, "you will continue to be kind to her?"

"To Thekla? I should think so."

"And," in a low, eager voice, "you have not said yet whether you believe me a gambler and a liar."

She looked at him with splendid faith in her eyes, and a mouth that trembled in spite of all her efforts. "You know," she answered simply "You do not need to ask me that!"

"I thank you," he said slowly and earnestly, fighting with every honourable instinct of his nature against the impulse to seize her in his arms, and tell her that so long as he had her trust and her love he cared nothing for all the world beside.

Perhaps she realised something of this, for she said hurriedly, "It is dinner-time, and I have not changed my dress, or seen if your room is ready. Will you go to your old room?" and she fled.

She was very silent during dinner until she heard of the proposed arrangement for starting Keith's fortunes, whereupon she opened the siege hotly, declared the plan to be worthy of the imagination of a lunatic, and, utterly untenable by a sane man, vowed that the

cottage in the village was stuffy, unhealthy, and uncomfortable, that the combined ailments of the neighbourhood could not be worth £100 a year, and finally that her father must have only agreed to the proposal to have the selfish pleasure of Keith's attendance on himself.

"I suppose, then, that your objections are caused by a contrary wish," Keith suggested drily.

She flashed one angry glance at him that reminded him forcibly of Thekla's indignant schoolfellow, and remarked frigidly, "Very well, do as you like. If you are determined to ruin your prospects by remaining here, you must do so."

He made her a little bow "Thank you," he said smiling, but his eyes sought hers with a pleading, wistful glance, which broke down her anger at once.

"Well," said her father, with a sigh, "here's to the health of the doctor of Glensheen, but I wish there were anything better—or worse—in the way of the health of his patients to wish him!"

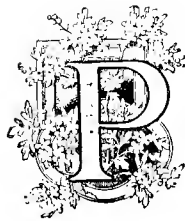
"How charitable!" the new doctor laughed. "You are not much better than a man I knew, who wished piously that measles might never die out of the land."





CHAPTER X.

MCGRATH'S OPINION.



PERHAPS both Mr. Wincanton and Stella hoped that a little reflection would convince Keith how unsuitable his proposed arrangements were, how irreconcilable the position of medical attendant to some of the roughest and most ignorant miners in Scotland would be with the habits and instincts of this proud and somewhat imperious young man. There had been a doctor once in the village, a callow young student from Glasgow, but even his humble spirit revolted against the treatment he received, and he had fled in wrath and disappointment, and scarcely richer in worldly possessions than when he had arrived.

But although the argument waxed hot and strong at the breakfast-table next morning, it was evident that Keith's resolution was fixed. He laughed at the adventures of the luckless Mackay, prophesied won-

drous "scores" over the ignorance and prejudices of the villagers, and drew a picture in glowing colours of grateful bandaged patients leading strings of aspiring companions, all eager to test the powers of the "braw lad frae Lunnon."

"Like the dog in the story?" said Jack, in delight.

"Exactly."

"I never heard that the dogs brought any fees to the doctor," Mr. Wincanton remarked.

"And does not the story end with the doctor's disgust with his patients?" Stella added maliciously.

"I may safely prophesy——"

"But you are not an impartial judge, Miss Wincanton," Keith interrupted merrily; then after a pause, with the air of one making a great concession, he proposed a new arbitrator, "We'll have disinterested advice," he said, with careful indifference. "I will go down to the mine this morning, interview your sturdy old manager, and see what he says to it."

"As if he could understand the position better than I can," Mr. Wincanton said, almost jealously.

"I daresay he could," Stella said gravely, and Keith shot a quick glance of inquiry at her face, wondering if McGrath could have told her anything. But her eyes, although troubled, met his frankly. "He will tell you how fond the people are of their own cures and nostrums, and how strongly they oppose any innovation. They will scarcely follow advice on any subject, and although they are glad enough to see me when they are ill or in trouble, it is more for

the pleasure of obtaining sympathy in their woes than medicine for their sickness."

"You're only a girl," Jack said contemptuously, "and Mackay was a muff—oh! wasn't he just? No wonder they laughed at his bottles and pills. But Thorold isn't either."

"Courtesy towards ladies is Jack's strongest virtue," remarked Keith ironically

"And towards his seniors," Mr. Wincanton added. "Who gave you permission to call Mr. Thorold by his surname?"

"Didn't ask permission," returned the unabashed youth. "You call him Thorold—so shall I."

Keith laughed. "Call me what you like."

"May I? Oh! I'll find a scrumptious nickname for you. I don't know, though—I like 'Thorold' best, or 'old Thorold,' and when you're extra nice to me I'll call you '*dear* old Thorold,'" with a ludicrous lengthening of the term of endearment.

"My boy," Keith said placidly, "what a time you will have at school!"

"Won't I? So will my pastors and masters! But I say, father," resting his elbows on the table and his face on his hands, and regarding his father with much gravity, "when am I to go to school?"

"I don't know, Jack." The smile vanished from his father's face—"I can't afford it yet."

Keith glanced almost unconsciously at Stella. She, too, looked troubled and anxious, and he realised with sudden pain how much graver, older, and quieter she

had become during the last few weeks. Truly the shadow had begun to fall on Glensheen.

Even Jack perceived that his last remark was unfortunate. "Don't fret about it, father," he said magnanimously; "it won't break my heart not to go to school yet."

"Lazy young scamp!" Keith said quickly. "Will you come down to the village with me? I suppose I dare not ask you to show me the splendours of the dear departed Mr. Mackay's residence, Miss Wincanton?"

Stella smiled, not very pleasantly. "Oh, I'll do that with pleasure."

"Why that sarcastic tone?"

"Because the sight of the cottage—and still more its interior—will cure your mania at once."

"That's comforting." But, with a sudden recollection that she would be a most undesirable auditor of his interview with McGrath, "Are you not busy this morning? Would not some other time be better?"

"I must go to the village this morning; I have to take some things to an old woman. You can see McGrath while I call on her, unless," with a quick flash of her old mischievous spirit, "you would like me to be chief counsel for the other side in this great arbitration case?"

"No, thank you. What chance would the poor old fellow have of judging impartially if you were there?"

She laughed, and went away to prepare for her walk, but both were somewhat silent as they descended the hill, and Jack had to do the taking for them all—a feat

which he performed admirably—until they parted to go their several ways at the pit's mouth.

McGrath was busy in his little office hut casting up accounts. He started violently as Keith entered the room, and a dusky flush crossed his weather-beaten old face.

"Eh, sir, ye've come for yer siller, and I'm just ashamed to see ye."

"I haven't come for anything of the kind—not but what a little would be welcome," Keith returned, shaking the shrunken old hand warmly.

"I've nought but a hundred and fifteen pounds seven shillings and saxpence put by for ye," McGrath said humbly.

"Can that be spared?" Keith asked quickly, and the manager looked at him with sad significance.

"Ye ken hoo it is wi' us, then?"

"I am afraid so; but if it isn't betraying confidence, I should be glad to know the whole facts of the case."

"You're not ane to spoil confidence," McGrath replied, and he told Keith everything without reserve.

It was even worse than the young man had feared. The mine was failing more and more, the seams of coal were all but exhausted and of inferior quality, and the rival mine-owners at Gorlas were injuring the owner of Glensheen in every possible way. In less than a year, if there were no change in the position of affairs, the mine must be closed.

"How about that seam which Mr. Wincanton believed to exist in the valley yonder?"

"It just exists in his own brain," McGrath replied gloomily. "There's no coal up there—nought but stanes, as I have telled th' laird mony a time.—I'm no mon of science, Mr. Thorold, an' I believe ye are, but I ken full weel where there's coal an' where there's nane!"

"I know very little of geology, not enough to venture an opinion," Keith said honestly. "But it should be tested."

"It will be," moodily. "Th' laird will have experts up frae Glasgie, but I ken a'ready what they'll say to it."

There was a short silence, and then the old man laid his hand on Keith's arm, and asked tremulously—

"Mr. Thorold—ye're a grand doctor, they say—what d'ye think o' th' laird? Will he live?"

The young doctor's face was very grave. "I don't know, McGrath. He is very weak—weaker really than during his illness. Has he known of all this trouble here?"

"I couldna' keep it frae him," the old man said brokenly.

"I suppose not, but any more—a shock of any kind—might bring on complications from which no doctor could save him."

"My puir old master! An' there's much trouble before him, sir."

"You think so?"

"Surely, Mr. Thorold. I wish ye could be by him when it comes."

"I shall, McGrath." And with much thankfulness at the thought that he had already devised this plan, and still more that all knowledge of the thousand pounds had been kept from Mr. Wincanton, Keith unfolded his plan, and insisted upon the retention of his secret.

McGrath heard him out, then seized both his hands and wrung them, while tears streamed down his rugged old face.

"God bless ye, Mr. Thorold; ye're no' far short of a hero!"

The young man's face was still grave as he rejoined Stella, and she said at once, "McGrath has persuaded you to give up this plan?"

"Not a bit of it," Keith replied stoutly "He warmly approves."

"Then he ought to know better. Did he not tell you what these people are?"

"He didn't mention them."

"Oh! then he has taken no thought for you at all!" she cried indignantly. "He only thinks, as father does, of the pleasure of having you here."

"And *you* think for me?" he said, with a smile that was tender and yet sad.

She flushed hotly. "I know what you are sacrificing to come here," she cried unsteadily. "Do you not know how often Thekla and I have talked about it? You wanted to go back to Cambridge, and work and read, and make experiments, and some day get a professor's chair at one of the universities."

"Did I?" he asked quietly. That old ambition seemed to have faded away somewhere into a past life in which he had no present interest. "I was very young then, Miss Wincanton, and very self-confident. I am older now."

"By how many weeks?"

"By a lifetime or two. I grew very old in my father's library the night before last. By the way, is it only two days ago, or is it two centuries?"

"Mr. Thorold," she said suddenly, looking at him with earnest, wistful eyes, "you have grown much older since breakfast-time this morning. What has McGrath been telling you?"

He started violently, and flushed deeply. "Nothing at all," he said, very mendaciously. "He said that you were a 'winsome lassie' once, but I am not sure that he meant me to repeat the confidence, and that Jack was a 'headstrong laddie'; and, by the way, where is that young man?"

"Don't!" she cried, with great pain in her voice. "Oh! Mr. Thorold, go back to Cambridge."

"I won't," he said sturdily. "Show me my new cottage, please."

Jack was there already in high glee. "Oh! it's such a queer little box!" he cried. "You couldn't swing a cat in the back sitting-room."

"Then it will do nicely for interviewing one patient at a time," the new doctor replied equably, "like the fortune-telling tents at a fancy-fair, for fear a second person should spy out the mysteries."

"Eh?" said Jack. This was slightly beyond his comprehension. "You won't tell fortunes."

"No, I'm going to make one," Keith replied.

"Here? How?" with great interest.

"Yes—how?" Stella repeated sadly

"I told you just now that I wouldn't have two people at once to spy out my mysteries," he laughed good-humouredly.

"There aren't any here," Jack said, in some wonder. "Dirt and blackbeetles aren't mysteries."

"They have a mysterious attraction for some people," Keith replied, in some disgust, "and evidently the housekeeper of my predecessor was one of them. You must tell me of some woman who can be trusted with a scrubbing-brush, please."

"You can't live *here*," Stella said sharply, with a little angry stamp of her foot.

"Can't I? We shall see. I am a member of an unpleasantly obstinate family, Miss Wincanton. You have seen the best of us in Thekla."

"I am not so sure of that," Stella thought, with a rising blush, and she turned away to examine the dark, dingy little rooms.

"Is there a carpenter here? That's all right," Keith said cheerfully. "Then he shall take down some of the stone-work round that window, and make it larger. And if he takes away these folding-doors, and puts up a rod for a curtain, and some shelves, and a strong deal table, I'll make the place look very different from this, I assure you, Miss Wincanton," with

real earnestness. "This place is palatial in comparison with my rooms at Cambridge."

"Ah! but you had your work there, and your friends, and——"

"I will have my work here, and friends too, I hope—best and truest friends," with a significance that she could not but observe.

"Will your father lend me a horse to ride over to Gorlas, and buy some household necessities?" he asked, as they walked home.

"Don't you know——" Jack began, but his sister checked him, as if, Keith thought, she could easier speak herself than hear another mention what obviously distressed her.

"We have sold all the horses except old Bess, Jack's pony. She isn't up to your weight for riding, I am afraid," with a tremulous little laugh, "but you can drive over when you like."

"You have not sold your bay?" Keith said sharply.

"Yes—we—we had to part with them all. Things are not very prosperous with us now."

"I know—but I did not know it was as bad as that."

She bent her head, but did not speak, and there was a silence, which not even Jack cared to break, for some little time. Then the little boy rushed off wildly after a butterfly, and Stella said, anxiously, "I often think that matters are worse here than we suspect. McGrath looks so oddly at my father sometimes when they speak about the mine. I fancy that he is still anxious about that payment that he had to go to

Edinburgh about; do you remember? But I don't like to ask him, and I think father has not noticed it."

"Don't worry about that," Keith said incautiously. "That is all right."

"Is it? Are you sure? How do you know?" she asked wonderingly.

Keith turned crimson. He was unaccustomed to deceptions, and did not carry them off well. "I saw your father was troubled, and—and I remembered that affair, and spoke to McGrath about it. I assure you it is all right."

She gave a sigh of relief, but a new embarrassing thought had just flashed across Keith's brain, and he looked at her apprehensively. "Miss Wincanton, have I been guilty of a great impertinence in interfering in your affairs?"

She shook her head with a faint smile. "You are too true a friend for that. I am afraid our impulse is to heap our troubles on you, not to hide them."

"I wish you would heap them all on me," he began impetuously, and then checked his next words with very great difficulty; for he remembered that he was the village doctor, with a cottage of three rooms, and a fortune of one hundred and fifteen pounds seven shillings and sixpence, and he bit his lips and set his teeth, and silently growled at his father all the rest of the way up the hill.



CHAPTER XI.

THE SHADOW ON GLENSHEEN.



KEITH felt even more harshly disposed towards his father and all the world, save some half-dozen persons, during the next few months. In that time he learnt something of the stern realities of life. It was not easy for a young fellow, brought up as he had been, to deny himself little luxuries which he had hitherto regarded as necessities, to potter about foul little hovels, attending dirty old women and sickly infants—his most frequent patients—to order them diet which he found to comprise unheard-of dainties, and to reflect that if he sent in bills, provided of course that they should deem it necessary to pay them at all, he might deprive his patients of their daily bread. He had resolved to spend as little as possible of his tiny capital, for he had sternly forbidden McGrath to pay him any more, and when this was exhausted there

would be no means of livelihood but such as might accrue from his practice—at present an infinitesimal quantity.

He worked very hard, finding his books—the only luxury he allowed himself—very fair companions, but it was a lonely and somewhat dreary life, with no amusements and scarcely any society.

The minister of the village was a worthy old man of a type rapidly dying out in the Scotch Church, belonging by birth and instincts to the peasant class, and no companion to the clever young doctor, and he and McGrath were the only other inhabitants of the village superior in education and refinement to the miners. The neighbouring gentry were not often to be found in their ancestral halls in the depths of winter, and although, when there, quite disposed to be friendly towards a cousin of Thorold of Glasdhu, Keith considered a walk of ten miles each way too high a price to pay for a dinner-party, and could seldom spare the time for a day's shooting.

His visits to Glensheen House were very frequent, but not altogether pleasurable. He had begun to time them so as to find only the laird at home, and although much attached to his friend and greatly interested in trying to strengthen his failing powers, these visits tended to remind him of the pleasant days of the two preceding summers, when he could entertain hopes that now would be wildest presumption, and the sense of contrast was hateful. Mr. Wincanton's invitations were numerous, but always resolutely refused, and one

day the elder man attacked him point-blank, demanding the reason of his refusals.

"I am too busy," Keith said, somewhat confused.

"Always? That's nonsense."

"I—I am reading hard. I can't spare the time."

"You will read yourself ill, my boy. All work and no play is good for no one."

"I'm not likely to hurt myself," Keith said shortly

"Thorold, this is troubling me. Have I hurt or offended you in any way?"

"Mr. Wincanton! You know better than that."

"What is it, then?"

Keith sprang to his feet and walked restlessly up and down the room.

"If you must have a reason—it is that I cannot trust myself here."

"My dear boy, why not?"

"I think you know," the young fellow said slowly. "It isn't fair to press me like this——"

Mr. Wincanton sighed. "I beg your pardon, Thorold, but we miss you sorely"

"Don't you think I miss—you? Do you think it is pleasant to cut myself off from you?"

"Then don't do it, lad. It isn't any good."

Keith's face crimsoned and his eyes shone brightly. "Do you mean——" he began, and broke off abruptly. "What a fool I am! I must get over this folly somehow. Good-bye, Mr. Wincanton."

But his friend held his hand firmly "Thorold, do you remember the place where my accident happened?"

“Yes.”

“I have men coming from Glasgow next week—mining engineers—to test that ground. I believe we shall find coal there, and then——”

“She would be further from me than ever,” Keith returned impatiently. “Good-bye.”

“Come here, lad—you hot, impetuous lad, who set up for being a quiet, reserved character—what are you doing? You don’t think you will be doctor of a mining village all your days, do you? You’ll get your chance some day, and rise to some giddy height, from which you can contemplate coal mines and mine-owners’ daughters with lofty contempt.”

“Don’t!” cried Keith bitterly. “I can’t stand it. Why should you tempt me?”

“Because I’m a match-making old parent, I suppose, with a womanly admiration for a tall young man. Are you going, lad? Well, don’t stop in that stuffy little den of yours growling at the world, but throw up the whole concern, and start somewhere where you will have a fair chance.”

“Who would give me the chance? Good-bye. I’ll send you up a new poison to get rid of those last symptoms, and don’t take an overdose, for I can’t spare the only friend I’ve got!” and he departed hurriedly through the window, possibly because Stella was coming in at the front door.

He received an intimation from McGrath a few evenings later that “they fules frae Glasgie” were coming the next day, and an invitation to be present

during the operations on the hill. He could not, however, leave a patient during the day, but he undertook to walk out in the afternoon to learn the result and convey it to Mr. Wincanton ; for knowing how confidently his friend had reckoned on this slender chance, and how injurious a disappointment would be to his health, Keith dreaded to entrust the task of breaking bad news, such as the engineers' opinion could hardly fail to be, to any other person.

And thus it happened that he found himself walking alone, and with an anxiety that was ever present in his mind, along the bridle path by which they had all ridden so cheerfully on that bright summer day. He seemed to hear again the gay voices of the two girls and Jack, and the ring of their horses' hoofs, as they cantered merrily before him, and the pleasant, kindly tones of his friend as he rode by his side in the full vigour of a healthy life that had scarcely touched old age.

And now he thought of the broken-down, feeble old man, sitting in helpless inaction to await a crushing disappointment—perhaps a fatal one ; of the young girl, all her joyous brightness gone, watching her father with tender hopelessness ; of the little boy, so soon to be an orphan, on whom would descend an inheritance—mortgaged and encumbered ; while the position of the other girl was scarcely more enviable, alone with an unloved and unloving father, cut off from all those who made life sweet to her. And as for himself—that was a subject on which he must not dwell, and with an unconscious, impatient movement he kicked a large

pebble that lay in his path, and hastened once more down the steps to the ledge.

He found the whole party assembled—the engineers, McGrath, and a few brawny miners—and by their silence, and the grieved expression on the old manager's face, Keith knew that his forebodings were fulfilled, and dreaded that this might be indeed his friend's deathblow.

"This is Mr. Thorold, sirs," the old manager said shortly, but he gave Keith a mournful glance that told him all.

"I need not ask what your opinion is," Keith said gravely.

"There is no coal here—or at least nothing worthy of the name, nothing that would pay for boring," the leading engineer said with cheerful alacrity—it was a matter of every-day occurrence to him. "My worthy friend here," indicating McGrath with a movement of his arm, "tells me he always thought so."

"Aye, but the laird didn't," the old man muttered. "Hoo will ye tell him, Mr. Thorold?"

"There is no hope—absolutely none?" Keith asked. "Have you tried all the ledge?"

"Trotted over it until our feet ache," came the ready answer, "but it's all the same."

Keith looked around at the frowning cliffs, at the distant hills, at the muddy ground beneath him. "You have tried them all?" he repeated stupidly.

"No, we haven't done that," with a laugh. "But we have tried this place, and there is nothing here."

"Thank you," said Keith, but the voice did not sound like his own. His mind was so full of his friend that unconsciously he had caught Mr. Wincanton's tone, and one, too, of crushed hopelessness.

The engineer looked up quickly with some show of sympathy. "I did not know that this affected you. I thought you were only a friend of Mr. Wincanton's."

"That is all," Keith replied with an effort. "But I think this disappointment will kill my friend, and—he has been a very kind friend to me. Will you excuse me if I ask you to return to my house instead of coming up to Mr. Wincanton's, and will you allow McGrath to play the host? I must go to my friend at once."

"Of course," the other said quickly. "I wish I could have given you better news. Good-bye."

Keith clambered up the steps again, dreading the task before him and yet longing to have it over. He had believed all the time that he knew what the engineers' report would be, his reason telling him that McGrath's experience was rather to be relied on than Mr. Wincanton's theory; but now he realised that deep down in his heart had lurked a secret hope and a secret fear—hope that Stella might be spared trouble and care, fear that she would be only further removed from his present level. And now it was all over, the fear and the hope, and he must go to her father and destroy the slender thread of life remaining in him. This was where he had stood on his way hither, and kicked away a pebble and his own selfish thoughts at the same time.

There was the stone, the same round, irregular black lump that he had spurned then, and—no—yes, it was, the same piece that he had thrown up from the slope below on the day of Mr. Wincanton's accident. He remembered its peculiarities, the curious dull black colour, and the great mass of the same metal from which it had obviously been broken. It was odd that he should have found it again. He turned it over in his hand, while strange, disconnected thoughts came into his head, thoughts that all had some reference to Stella.

But he must not think of Stella now. He was a selfish fellow—Kenneth had told him so long ago, and for Thekla's sake he had tried to become less selfish ever since. Now he would try a little harder, for the sake of one dearer to him even than Thekla, and he would keep this little lump of metal in memory of his resolution. With a derisive laugh at his own folly, he transferred it to his pocket; and then, through the gathering gloom of the winter evening, he proceeded on his weary tramp to Glensheen.

The shadow fell on the house indeed that night. The shock of the disappointment, the wearing effect of months of anxiety and suspense, and the weakness resulting from his long illness, combined to strike Mr. Wincanton down. And although he tended him with constant care, and tried every remedy that skill or affection could suggest, his young doctor was sure that he had brought home his friend's deathblow from that fatal valley. So far as he could judge, Mr. Wincanton might linger for weeks, even for months, but he would never recover.

Keith did not know how far Stella realised this. She nursed her father with unvarying patience, was always cheerful in his room, and he had no means of knowing whether she gave way when alone, or simply did not know in what peril Mr. Wincanton lay. But she grew pale and thin, and looked harassed and worn when moving about the house attending to her many duties, and his doctor's eye told him that the strain was too much for her powers of endurance.

"I hope I haven't taken an unpardonable liberty," he said cheerfully, one day, "but I have invited a guest to come to your house, as I have not, unfortunately, a room for her in mine, and she arrives to-morrow."

"Thekla?" she cried, in glad surprise. "Oh! how good of you."

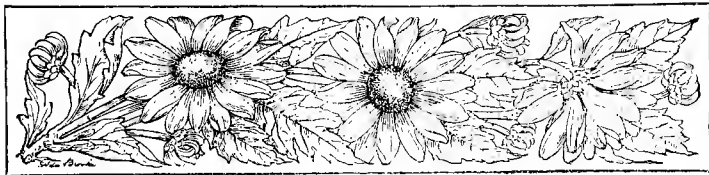
"Then it is not an unpardonable liberty?"

"It is the greatest pleasure I have known for a long time. But will your father let her come?"

"He seems to have been extremely willing to spare her; 'uncomplimentary cheerfulness,' she calls it," he replied, somewhat bitterly. "My father finds it easy to part with his children."

"You don't believe that," she said gravely, "so don't say it—and, above all, don't think it. Dear Thekla, I would rather think of seeing her again. But it seems cruel to bring her to this house of mourning."

It was the first indication she had given him that she knew more than he had yet told her of her father's condition.



CHAPTER XII.

IN THE PIT.



“He will sleep now, I think,” Keith murmured hopefully.

“And then?” Stella whispered softly, but with intense eagerness.

“If he sleeps for an hour or more he will live through this attack,” he answered.

At this moment Donald, Mr. Wincanton’s servant, appeared in the doorway, and silently held out a scrap of paper to the young doctor. Keith opened it, his cheek grew pale under its bronze tint, and he looked long and anxiously at the sleeping figure on the bed.

Stella made a silent, inquiring movement with her lips, and he beckoned her towards the door, and followed her noiselessly outside.

“Miss Wincanton,” he said hoarsely, looking at her with strange hesitation in his manner, “will you read that?” and he laid the paper in her hand.

The handwriting of the few straggling, unsteady words was McGrath's, the paper a torn, dirty scrap, but the information was startling and unmistakable, and seemed to burn through into her brain :

"Bad accident in the pit—several men hurt, some terribly. Can you leave the laird?" Then, scrawled as if in afterthought, "Ought to warn you there is great danger in getting at the place."

For a moment she did not speak, but looked from the paper to him in a strange, bewildered manner, and he, motioning to Donald to go into the sick-room, came up and took her hand, gazing straight into her eyes.

"It is for you to say—am I to go?"

"And leave him?" she said brokenly

"Yes."

"And if he awakes and you are not here?" she asked, with white lips.

"I hope he will not awake, but——"

"Those men are in agony, perhaps dying, and no one with them." She shivered from head to foot, but looked up bravely. "You may be able to save them, and *he* would say go. Yes, you must go! But oh!" with sudden realisation, "it is sending you into danger."

"There is more danger in leaving them," he said quietly.

"Not to you!" with a sudden cry of pain.

"Stella!" he said sternly, reproachfully, scarcely conscious perhaps that he had called her by that name, "would you wish me to fail in my duty because there might be danger in carrying it out?"

She shivered again, and looked up at him with pleading, tearful gaze.

"Forgive me," she murmured, "I know you must go! It is right—and you will always do what is right."

He never quite knew what happened afterwards. He had some vague recollection of drawing her towards him, some broken words of farewell, yes—and of a long, eager kiss. And then he rushed away down the corridor, and stopped at the sight of a tray on the table at the top of the stairs, and the instinct of the doctor overcame the wild emotion of the man. He came back quietly, gave her clear directions for attending to her father, pressed her hands once more, and was gone.

And, standing by the window in the corridor, she watched him racing down the avenue in the pelting sleet without hat or greatcoat, and troubled herself vaguely about these minor risks even while realising fully, with a kind of hopeless terror, that he was going into danger—perhaps to his death. She was still standing there, although he was out of sight, when Thekla came to her with eyes wide with astonishment.

"Oh, Stella, do you know what has happened? I cannot understand it. A boy is waiting at the back door, Phemie says, for the answer to a note sent for Keith, and he is rushing away down the hill without a hat on his head."

With instinctive thoughtfulness Stella crushed up the little slip of paper in her hand. Thekla should

not see those terrible words at the end of McGrath's message.

"There is an accident in the pit," she said mechanically, marvelling that she could speak so quietly of it. "There are some men injured, and they have sent for him."

"Isn't that like Keith—dear boy that he is," the little sister said quickly and admiringly, "to rush off without a hat or umbrella through the rain?"

"An umbrella wouldn't ward off danger," Stella muttered, with a ghastly little smile.

She felt inclined to laugh aloud at the thought of Keith taking an umbrella into the pit with him, and then she recollected herself with a sudden start. Was she mad? How could she laugh? Was it the chilly air of the wintry afternoon that made her heart and hands so cold while her eyes and brain burn like fire?

Thekla saw the shiver, glanced up at the white, strained face, and tried to take the icy hands in her warm ones in an impulse of kindly pity. But Stella drew back her hands with a quick movement—she must not let Thekla see that piece of paper.

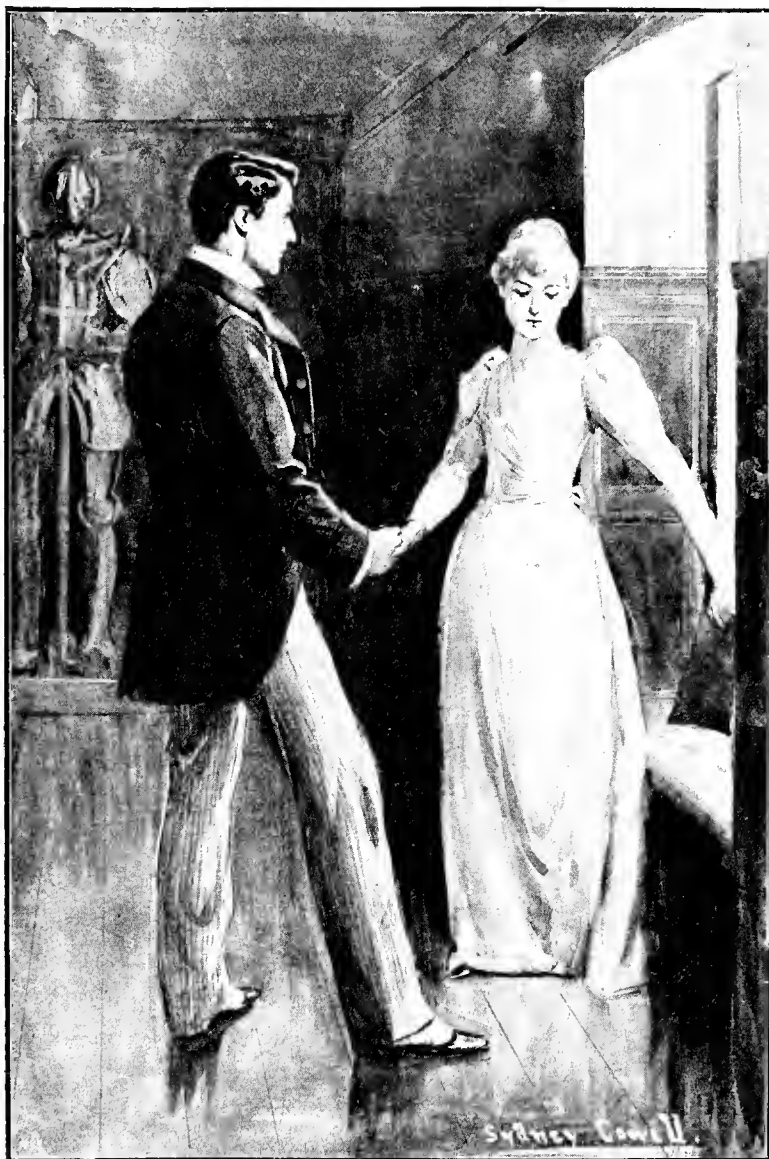
"This has frightened you, dear," Thekla said gently. "You have had so much to worry you lately. Will you go and lie down, and I will sit with your father?"

"No, no," Stella said, with a new recollection. "He told me what to do for father if he awoke. Although you know," with dreary lack of emotion, "if he should awake now there would be no hope of his living. I must go to father, Thekla, dear."

She returned quietly to his room, sent Donald away, and took her stand by the window with a vague, dreamy idea of waiting there to watch for any tidings of Keith. She must have remained there for hours, almost motionless, benumbed with terror and anxiety. From time to time she turned to see whether her father were still sleeping, and if the fire needed replenishing, but always returning to her post even after the short daylight had faded and the gathering darkness prevented her tracing even the outline of the grand old fir-trees in the avenue. She had seen—one after another—the village lad who had brought the note for Keith, Donald, Jack, the women-servants, and finally Thekla, passing down the hill towards the village, all intent on obtaining news, and she—whose agony of suspense was more intense than anything of which she had ever dreamed—had to remain with her sleeping father, with no other companion than her terrified thoughts.

What was that? Was it fancy, or was there a sound—dull and heavy as the report of a distant cannon. No, it was not fancy, for her father heard it, and stirred uneasily, muttering unintelligible words in his sleep. However, he did not awake, and she knew that she ought to rejoice, because this sleep was giving him prolonged life, but no relief for his sake could take the terror from her heart—she seemed to know that sooner or later they would bring her news, and it would be that the sound which still rang in her ears like a knell, had taken her lover from her.

She roused herself at length to lay some coals softly



"WILL YOU GIVE ME MY ANSWER ANOTHER TIME?" HE SAID.

on the fire, and to listen to her father's heavy, regular breathing. It was quite dark now, save for the glow of the firelight, but that would suffice to show her whether her father were asleep or awake, and no light could illumine the darkness of her dread and despair. She tried to pray, but neither words nor thoughts would come. She could only stand there while the long hours passed "on leaden wings."

"Stella," a low voice came from the bed. "Is that you?"

"Yes, father, dear." How selfish, how faithless she had been! If Keith had been there he would have been rejoicing in the knowledge that her father was saved, but she had given no thanks for this great mercy. How good God had been to her! How little she had trusted Him! Then came a rush of new thoughts into her heart, a recollection of the promise so easily forgotten in her sorrow—"Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord."

She would wait and trust, and the strength would be given her to bear whatever might come.

She crossed the room softly, gave her father medicine in accordance with Keith's directions, smiled her congratulations when he remarked that he felt much better, and prayed at last with intense earnestness for strength to bear and to answer bravely his next question.

"Where's Thorold? He was here——"

"Yes, dear, he—he has gone—to the village," she stammered.

"Of course," her father said, with a satisfied smile. "Very tired, dear. I will sleep again."

"Do," she said, so deeply and earnestly that he looked up in astonishment.

"My Star, are you frightened? I am much better."

"Yes, I can see that," with a tremulous little smile, and she bent down and kissed him.

"You look tired, Star; go and get some dinner."

"I don't want any—yet."

"Yes, you do. Go—I wish it, child."

"Very well, dear," she said submissively. She would leave the door ajar that she might be able to slip back unperceived, and now she would go down and see if there were any news.

She felt her way down the wide staircase, unlit by the errant domestics, and reached the silent hall. There was no one about—the house was empty but for her father and herself. Cautiously she opened the front door, and went out on the steps to listen. The rain had ceased now, but she could hear the splash of the drops falling still from the trees and the eaves of the house, she could hear the low, sad murmur of the sea away beyond the village, but not a sound from the village itself. There was something startling in the very silence.

Hark! There were footsteps now—light steps, unsteady with haste, and she ran down to meet them, and rushed against Jack in the shadow of the great fir-trees.

He clung to her, his little childish frame shaken with sobs, and buried his face on her breast.

“ Oh ! Stella, Stella ! He went down the pit—and another fall came—and I’ve waited and waited, and they can’t get him out—and they say he’s killed ! ”

“ Who ? ” she cried, in a shrill, unnatural voice.

“ Thorold—dear old Thorold ! ”

She had known that it was coming, and she received the news with astonishing quietness.

“ Are you sure, Jack—quite, *quite* sure ? ”

The boy’s sobs were his only answer.

She stood in absolute silence, with the little fellow leaning against her, scarcely conscious of any emotion. “ I must go to father,” she said at last, in a low voice from which every trace of emotion had disappeared. “ He will want me all the more.”

“ Don’t,” sobbed the child. “ It’s just as if you wanted him only for father. I want him for myself.”

“ And I—oh !—— ” She could say no more. If she once dared to say even to herself how she would want him during every moment of her life, she would not be able to face her father and go through the duty to which *he* had left her. She looked once longingly, wistfully, towards the lights of the village, and then she moved slowly away and entered the house. Jack was following her into the hall, when she turned on him with sudden eagerness.

“ Where is Thekla ? ”

“ Down—down there, by the pit.”

“ And you left her ? Don’t you know that we must look after her now—for *his* sake ? Go and fetch her, Jack.”

"All right," he said submissively, awed by her manner, and he started again bravely down the dark avenue.

He found Thekla by the pit's mouth, but no longer alone. A tall figure had just thrown himself from a smoking, foam-flecked horse, and had seized her hands.

"Thekla—you here? Then it *is* true?"

"Kenneth!" She gave a little cry of relief and misery together. "Oh! Ken, Keith is down there!" and she pointed despairingly to the pit.

"I heard so out at Glasdhu, but hoped it was not true. Don't, Thekla, don't!" as a convulsive sob ran through her whole frame. "I'll go down and bring him up to you."

"You can't, Ken, it would kill you too!"

"I hope not, little one. God willing, I will bring him to you, and come back safely myself. You want me, darling?" half-questioningly, half-assertingly.

"Oh, Ken, you don't know how I have wanted you!" she gasped.

For a moment her hands lay clasped against his breast, and then he was gone, pressing through the crowd to where, in the flickering light of torches, a knot of miners stood, gazing irresolutely at the blackness of the pit's mouth.

"Where's the manager?" Kenneth asked, looking in vain for the familiar wizened little figure of McGrath.

"Doon th' pit."

"How? With Mr. Thorold—the doctor, I mean?"

"Aye, they're killed taegether!"

Kenneth trusted that Thekla had not heard this unfeeling reply, and yet, angry though he was, he saw that these rough men were really deeply affected after their own fashion. He could now understand their inaction. With the owner ill in bed, and the manager among the victims in the mine, there was no one to direct proceedings, or to take the lead in carrying out the suggestions that were plentiful enough. He was well known, however, as the laird of Glasdhu, and he easily obtained all the information that he wanted as to the position of the imprisoned men. Then, when he announced his intention of going down and called for volunteers, he was astonished and delighted at the numbers who pressed forward. He quickly divested himself of his coat and superfluous garments, stepped into the cage, and went down amid the hoarse cheers of the bystanders.

Then came another long period of suspense to those above, a time which seemed to Thekla interminable, and then a sudden murmur came from the workers below, and spread like wild-fire through the throng of despairing wives and mothers and children and friends. Only a few words, but the first words of hope that had come up since the second fall had occurred, imprisoning alike those previously injured in the first accident and the little band of intrepid rescuers, who had ventured through all dangers to bring them aid. Until now it had been believed that the second catastrophe, the fall of a huge mass of coal and rubbish, had confined its victims in a tiny cutting, where the instantaneous rush

of foul air must have killed them. But now came the message that had sent a ray of hope to the most despairing heart—a knocking had been heard in another direction, and Mr. Thorold and his volunteers were blasting away the rock, yard by yard, regardless of the very real danger to themselves of this indiscriminate mining, to reach the spot whence the knocking came.

Jack had joined Thekla, who stood with white face and terror-stricken eyes, gazing down into the blackness of the shaft in stony silence. She had heard nothing of the murmur, although they were repeating it in glad voices all around her, and she started when Jack slipped his cold little hand into hers, and looked at him with scarce recognition.

“Thekla, do you hear? They think he’s alive! Oh! aren’t you glad?”

But she could not answer. She was listening now with painful intensity to the sounds from below, the hoarse shouts of men, the sullen roar of explosives.

“Yon’s the blasting powder,” said a voice close by, that of a burly giant, early disabled in an attempt at rescue, and now only an unwilling spectator. “Th’ stranger gentleman said he’d a new kind——”

“Aye, an’ he wadna’ let th’ ithers use it, for it’s sair risky wairk,” an old man answered him.

Thekla clutched the little boy’s hand in a nervous, painful grasp, but before she could speak there arose another and louder report, followed by a crash, distinctly audible to the anxious listeners above; then came a moment’s silence and a shout of triumph.

“ They’ll ha’ reached them, an’ they maun be livin’, or they wadna’ screech like that ! ” was passed tremulously from mouth to mouth. “ Oh ! the Lord be praised ! ”

And when in time the fullest confirmation of their hopes reached the dense crowd of relatives and friends — “ Alive ! All living ! ” — it was not only the women and children who broke down under the sudden revulsion of feeling. After this the waiting was easily borne ; only Thekla seemed to realise how long it was before the cage appeared once more in the shaft with a living burden. Then she saw that it was an injured man, whom kindly hands were lifting out and laying gently on the ground, and she suddenly broke away from Jack’s detaining little fingers, rushed to the spot where the inanimate figure was lying, and bent over it, crying, with long tearless sobs between each word —

“ Oh ! look at me ! Speak to me ! My darling — my darling ! ”

She heard nothing of the loud shout that rose from a hundred voices, she saw nothing of the stream of men, all more or less injured, but all living, brought up from the living grave in which they had been entombed for hours. She did not feel Jack’s frantic tugs at her arm, her dress, even her hair.

“ Thekla,” he was shouting, “ it’s all a mistake ! I don’t know who the hurt man is, but here is dear old Thorold — alive and well ! ”

She knew nothing of it all until another hand was laid gently on her shoulder, and Keith’s own voice said tenderly, “ Thekla, dear, I am here.”

She looked at him with as much indifference as if he had returned merely from a half-hour's walk. "Yes, Keith, I am so glad you are there. Make him speak to me."

"Whom, dear?" and then he bent down over her, gazed in silent amazement at the man at her feet for a moment, and said, with sudden comprehension of the preoccupation that had made her forget even him, "Why, it is Kenneth. How came he here?"

"'Twas he that blasted the bit hole for us to creep oot," McGrath's voice said behind him. "A bit o' rock fell on his leg, the men tell me, but he went on wairking till th' hole was made, an' then he fainted. 'Tis th' laird o' Glasdhu; he rode over frae there this afternoon."

"He is only fainting, Thekla," Keith said somewhat unsteadily, after examining his cousin. "Can you get me some spirits, McGrath?"

The manager hastily produced a flask, and Keith applied it to his cousin's mouth. McGrath's medicine had the desired effect. The dark eyes opened, travelled round the strange faces in perplexity until they lighted on Thekla, and then a faint smile broke over his face.

"My dear little girl—my own little Thekla, is it not?" he whispered, as he seized her willing hands.

"Yes, Kenneth, always your own Thekla," she murmured.

"My word!" Keith remarked blankly. "I'll never try again to manage any other person's love affairs."

"You had better not. If you make such a hash of

your own as you did of ours," Kenneth said faintly, but with a merry smile, "you'll repent it all your days ! "

There was no contradicting this statement. "Come, drink some more of this," said the doctor, authoritatively, "and then you shall be carried up to my house. Now, shut up, Kenneth ! I believe you have saved my life to-day, but that does not give you the right to disobey your doctor. You'll have heaps of time for talking later on."

And his cousin subsided, ready enough to keep silence so long as Thekla's hand lay in his.

Directly he could escape from his patients, and had removed some of the signs of the perils of the day from his face, hands, and clothing, Keith made his way up to Glensheen House, with Jack hanging on his hand. The little boy had been too happy in the recovery of his friend to leave him for a moment, and he now rather resented being ordered to bed. But Keith was obdurate, making him slip off his boots in the hall and steal up to his room ; and then the young doctor, his heart beating with strange eagerness, stole up to that other room.

Quietly though he came, she heard him—at first with incredulity and awe, and then with a revulsion of gladness that took from her all power of speech. She simply came towards him, her eyes shining like stars, and laid her hands in his. Neither spoke ; there was no need of words—they might even have spoilt the first glow of delight. She stood merely, and gazed, and gazed—knowing nothing but that she saw him alive

and well, and that her heart was saying a thanksgiving which her lips could not frame.

And then came a low voice from the bed. "Thorold, are you there? How good you are to me. Good-night."

"Ah! he had his sleep—nothing disturbed him?" Keith whispered gleefully, the lover lost in the doctor.

"*It* did not awake him," replied the nurse.

"He'll do all right," continued the doctor, with much contentment. "Now go to bed. I will sit up with him to-night, and to-morrow," in the other voice, the voice of the man and the lover, "I will tell you all about myself," following her once more to the corridor.

"As if I would let you!" she cried indignantly, referring probably to his first proposition. "You look worn out now"

"Worn out? I could dance a jig or a reel, if it were not for fear of waking him up! But you are as white as a ghost."

"I'm not. I am as fresh as—as anything. Do you know," reproachfully, "you went out in the rain this afternoon without your hat or an umbrella?"

"Did I? And *you* thought of them," with a beaming smile. "Well, I didn't, so I couldn't have wanted them."

"And you were able to save those men?"

"All of them, and Kenneth saved me. Now, go to bed."

"I won't!"

"Do you want me to carry you?"

He looked capable of carrying out the threat, and she beat a hasty retreat. But in a few minutes she re-appeared with some substantial refreshments.

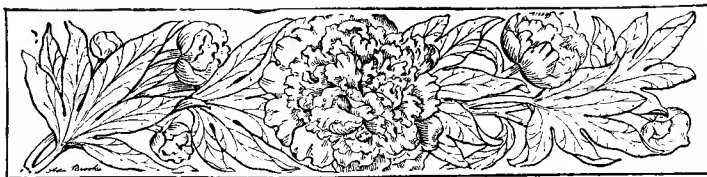
"I don't believe," she said, with great solemnity, "that you have eaten anything to-day."

"I breakfasted fourteen hours ago," he returned, attacking the viands with much avidity, "but I have only now discovered that I am hungry. Why, here's Thekla! I had forgotten all about you, child."

"Kenneth is asleep," said Thekla composedly, as if nothing else in the world mattered. "Your old woman and McGrath are with him, so I came home to see about you."

"That was very good of you," said her brother politely.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR'S REPORT.



HERE was no doubt about the fact that Kenneth enjoyed being regarded as an invalid. His leg was certainly painful, but there was no reason why he should not have been driven over to Glasdhu, and Keith indeed suggested it, with some thought of the superior comforts of the castle. But Kenneth would not hear of it, and Thekla strongly supported him in his rebellion. The doctor's house might not be palatial, but it was in a lively situation, whence every movement of the villagers could be observed, and his cousin referred piteously to the terrible dulness of the view from his ancestral halls. Moreover it might be dangerous for a person in his 'precarious condition' (the doctor's comment on that remark was discourteous in the extreme) to be so far away from medical aid—and he required such careful nursing! Certainly he

was never so helpless as when Thekla was in the room, flying to execute his smallest desire, gazing at him with admiring pity, not only on account of the heroic conduct that had caused his sufferings, but also of the patience with which he bore them, and she was almost ready to quarrel with her brother because he deemed some others of his patients in more need of his services than his cousin.

Kenneth found it an exquisite joke to watch Keith going about his duties as the village doctor. He betrayed the greatest interest in the maladies of the various patients, read up Keith's books in his absence to ply him with questions on his return, and after extracting the fullest details with regard to some uninteresting case, would sink back in his chair, and laugh with heartiest amusement.

"Where is the joke?" Keith asked good-humouredly.

"You couldn't see it—you are far too much in earnest to understand my little joke. There comes your worthy friend, old McGrath, to drag you somewhere or other, to give an opinion on some subject of which you know nothing. That man worships you, and believes you infallible on every subject—except the one you really understand."

"And that is——"

"Your profession, of course. He thinks you are 'just a wee bit ower venturesome' in that, but perfect in everything else."

Keith laughed and went out, and Kenneth turned with sudden gravity to Thekla.

“Little woman, I believe your father would give half he possesses to see Keith as he is now. Do you write to him?”

“Now and then,” Thekla replied, not very readily

“Do you tell him all about good old Keith, and his work?”

“I never thought of it—in fact, I never know what to say, and my letters are as short and stupid as when I was eight years old.”

“I remember them: ‘My dear Papa,—I am quite well, we all are quite well, I hope you are quite well’—eh?”

“Something like that. But, Kenneth, do you think he would like me to write about Keith? He never mentioned his name, or allowed me to do so.”

“And hungered for it all the more! I believe I know Sir Alexander better than either of his children.”

“You could not know less of him than I do,” with a sigh.

“Go over to Keith’s writing-table, little girl, steal some of his paper and his best pen, and we will concoct a letter together that shall make his hair stand on end with pride! McGrath brought me a gorgeous description of the young doctor’s self-denying gallantry, &c., in the local paper. We’ll cut that out and send it.”

“There’s something about some one else in that,” she said shyly.

“We won’t inflict that on your father. Don’t be afraid, it shan’t be lost to posterity. We’ll have it

engrossed on the biggest sheet of parchment, framed in a gold frame a foot wide, and hung up at Glasdhu—when we are there together.”

Thekla's face burned and she hurried over to the writing-table, disarranging Keith's papers with shocking disregard of his orderly habits.

“I wonder what this is in the drawer—a little bit of stone—no, coal, with a date on a piece of paper. August 25th! Why, that was the day of Mr. Wincanton's accident. I wonder what it can be?”

“Curiosity—thy name is woman,” quoth Kenneth sententiously. “What does it matter to you, child? It is some specimen from one of the mines probably—perhaps from the place that was tested the other day. I know something about coal—having tried twice ineffectually to find it at Glasdhu, and to become as rich a man as some of my neighbours. Give it to me.”

“Who is curious now?” said Thekla saucily, as she laid it in his hand.

“It isn't coal for all its blackness,” Kenneth said doubtfully. “No, it's a mineral; and yet—— It *is* coal!”

“Listen to the oracle!”

“Be quiet, young woman; you must not excite the poor invalid. Now put this back, and come and write your letter.”

She put the specimen down carelessly on the writing-table, and returned with paper and ink to obey the behests of her imperious master.

“Will this do, my lord?”

"I should think not! Is that how you are going to write to me in the future, Thekla?"

"You? No—not quite," with a little smile, as though already composing tender little sentences.

"This reads like a Complete Letter-writer. No, no, let's put some life into it. Fire away—this must evidently be a dictation lesson."

While the little comedy was proceeding indoors, Keith had joined McGrath outside, and the mirth had faded from his face as he met the manager's eyes.

"What is it, McGrath?"

"We are ruined, sir," the old man said simply, but instinctively lowering his voice so that his words should not be overheard by the anxious women standing about in the street. The men were all down at the pit, hanging around its silent mouth, awaiting the verdict of the Inspector with the desperate anxiety of those to whom work is bread.

"How? The Government Inspector——"

"Says the mine is no' safe—the coal is expended in every accessible pairt, and we maun just shut up th' pit."

The old man's voice was quiet and even, with the dulness of despair, and Keith felt something of the same feeling creeping over him as he stood there, looking across the village street at the ugly buildings, the great, gaunt chimneys that meant bread for the busy toilers around him and life to the failing old man up the hill, and trying to realise what would happen when the familiar creak of the windlass should sound

no more in Glensheen. He recalled a light, girlish remark made by Stella nearly two years ago—that the hideous mine shafts spoilt one of the loveliest glens in Scotland. The shafts might be pulled down now, the stones of the cottages might be carted away and thrown into the sea; the next inhabitant of the dear old white house (for he supposed it would have to be let if it could not be sold during Jack's minority) might turn the red deer loose in the village street if he liked. The miners would settle somewhere else, like a flock of crows driven from a field; faithful old McGrath must seek some other home; the laird would need none but the shelter of the great stone vault of his ancestors; and his children?—Keith gave a bitter, angry laugh as he reflected that his own insane pride had prevented his having a home to offer to that gentle girl who would so soon have none; for, as she had prophesied, when his anger died away he had become convinced that he had done his father injustice—he might have told him all, in perfect confidence that Mr. Wincanton's secrets were as safe in the custody of the father as the son.

It was a bitter reflection, and the young man felt strangely humbled and small as he walked beside the manager to the pit's mouth. The Inspector was there—a courteous, kindly official, extremely sorry for the pain he had been obliged to inflict on the old man, but unable to hide his natural gratification that what might have been such a terrible accident had been attended by no loss of life. He was very civil to

the young doctor, whose praises had been sung to him by manager and miners, and took pains to explain the nature of the accident; but the information that the catastrophe had been occasioned by the actual poverty of the substance through which the miners had been driving struck Keith with a peculiar sense of appropriateness.

There was some discussion as to the advisability of sinking another shaft, but the practical engineers present were all of opinion that there was no more coal in Glensheen pit to be brought out by any means, and Keith knew that McGrath shared their conviction.

“I should like to see the other Mr. Thorold,” the Inspector suggested. “I hear that he conducted the blasting on some unusual principle, and, if I may, I should like to make inquiries about it.”

He looked questioningly at Keith, who discovered that Kenneth was regarded in the village as a desperately wounded hero, and had so been represented to the officials. He laughed rather grimly. “I don’t think an interview would hurt him,” he said, conducting the Inspector towards his cottage, where he left him, while proceeding to Glensheen House again as the bearer of bad news.

Kenneth received the Inspector pleasantly, and willingly explained his means of using explosives—a rather daring but very effective combination of forces which he had learnt in the laboratory at Cambridge during one of his fitful attempts to study there. The

official commented on the danger, but made notes notwithstanding, with a view to future experiments.

“How is your leg?” he asked kindly. “The young doctor—your brother, I presume—seemed to think that you were going on all right.”

“He’s my cousin, and he thinks me an amazing humbug,” Kenneth laughed. “He doesn’t approve of my sitting here to be coddled and pitied.”

“Yet it is sometimes a very pleasant occupation,” suggested the other, drily, “especially if one has a very pretty nurse.”

Kenneth laughed and coloured, and the Inspector drew his own conclusions. In turning to leave the room, after a few words of warm congratulation on his companion’s exploit in the mine, his eye fell on the little black object which Thekla had placed on the writing-table by the window. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand.

“Very nice little specimen. Where did this come from?”

“I don’t know,” Kenneth replied. “It is my cousin’s, and I have already been wondering what it is? Is it coal?”

“Yes, *cannel* coal, and of excellent quality. I did not know that there was any in this district.”

“Is it worth anything?”

“*Cannel* coal? I should think so. I have known the time when £4 a ton was paid for it at the pit’s mouth. Ask your cousin where he found it, and, if it were in this neighbourhood, he had better set to work at boring. Good-bye.”

Kenneth thought little more of the scrap of coal until Keith's return, weary and dispirited, from Glen-sheen House. Mr. Wincanton was worse, so ill indeed as to be quite oblivious of the visit of the Inspector and all other matters, and the task still lay before the young doctor of telling him that he was a ruined man, if he lived to hear the news at all. Thekla had returned to the house to preside at Jack's lunch, and the two cousins sat down alone to the meagre little midday meal at the cottage.

"Old fellow," Kenneth said affectionately, "what's the matter?"

"Everything," was the curt reply.

"That's a tall order," said his cousin, with much composure. ("Miss Wincanton refused him, I suppose, poor old chap," he remarked inwardly, his "young fancy" turning chiefly "to thoughts of love" just at present.) "Do you want advice, Keith, or would that be the last straw of your burden?"

"I don't know," cried Keith, springing to his feet and throwing down his knife and fork. Then, as Kenneth had expected, while the latter sat eating his lunch, Keith walked up and down the little room relieving his mind of some of his pent-up anxieties.

"It's pretty bad," Kenneth remarked quietly, aware that he must "go gently" with this reserved young cousin of his.

"It can't be worse—until Mr. Wincanton dies," Keith said, with bitter sarcasm.

"Poor old Keith—how hard these quiet fellows can

be hit!" his cousin thought. "I expect my friend Sir Alexander goes on somewhat in this manner—when his study door is safely locked." But he only said quietly, "You must keep this last blow from the poor old laird as long as you can."

"But *she* will want to know——" Keith began incautiously.

"Ah!" It was all that Kenneth could do to repress a smile at the unconscious betrayal of his reserved cousin's feelings. "You haven't told her yet?"

"She could think of nothing but her father this morning."

"Then keep it dark, old fellow, for the present, and afterwards——" he stopped reflectively. "Keith, old boy, don't think me a meddling fool, but if things are so bad as they seem, why keep up this farce any longer?"

"What farce?"

"The village doctor business. Why not make it up with your father, and let him start you in such a way as to give you a decent prospect to offer Miss Wincanton?"

Keith's face darkened. "Who told you——" he began hotly.

But Kenneth hobbled across the room and laid his hand on his cousin's arm. "I'm not blind, old fellow; I can't help seeing some things. Come, will you take my advice about your father?"

"I can't," Keith replied curtly.

"Why not? Is your pride stronger than your love?"

"It isn't that," Keith said, in a low voice. "My pride doesn't prevent my seeing that I was partly in the wrong, but I cannot attempt to make it up with my father while I have no proof to offer him that I am not what he thinks me."

"What he thinks you? What do you mean?" his cousin asked wonderingly

Keith flushed deeply. "A gambler and a liar."

"What! Is that why you quarrelled? No wonder. Upon my word, Sir Alexander is a worse judge of character than I thought he was. He must have a bad opinion of poor old Cambridge as a corrupter of morals."

"No, he thinks Homburg was the scene of my dissipation. I don't know why he pitched on that rather than some other place where I have never been."

Kenneth looked somewhat uncomfortable. "Perhaps he heard of my little adventure there, and thinks I put you up to it."

"Have you been to Homburg?" without much interest.

"For the first time, and I hope the last," Kenneth replied, with sudden gravity. "Do you remember Harry Wellman, a kind of cousin of mine? He got into some horrid scrapes there, and I tried to pull him out, and found myself mixed up with such a set of people as I hope never to see again. Bah! some of those greedy, hungry, inhuman faces around the gambling tables haunt me still! No, I was glad to clear out of it."

“When was this?”

“Last year—September, I think. Why?”

Keith laughed somewhat bitterly. “Probably my father did hear of it, for that was about the time of my supposed misdeeds.”

“It is possible. I saw at the railway station some old man whom I had met at your father’s house, but as I did not know so much as his name, I only bowed when he spoke to me. He may have reported me.”

“Very likely. Well, I must be off.”

“You have had no lunch, Keith.”

“All I want, thanks.” He went to the writing-table for some instruments, and made a sound of annoyance.

“Who put this here?”

“That scrap of coal? You must not punish the offender, for it was my fault.”

“Thekla, I suppose?” with an indulgent smile.

“Originally; however, the Government Inspector touched it last. By the way, he was greatly interested in it. Wanted to know where you found it.”

“On the hills, some little distance from here,” Keith said curtly, almost angrily. That little lump of coal had become somewhat precious in his eyes by association, and he was annoyed at the thought of strangers touching it.

“Was it on Mr. Wincanton’s land?” Kenneth asked, with great interest.

“Yes.”

“Then get your sappers and miners, and all your

artillery to work at that spot, my dear fellow, without loss of time ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ That—if this Inspector understood his trade properly, and I him—there is a fortune to be found for Mr. Wincanton yet ! ”

But although Keith promised to set McGrath on the trail, it was not with much hopefulness, for there had been too many disappointments already to allow him to retain any belief in the restoration of the Wincanton fortunes.





CHAPTER XIV

A STARTLING REVELATION.



WITHOUT delay Keith went over to see McGrath, rightly expecting to find him at the deserted works. There he sat, with his grim, earnest old face bent over the large account books, as the young doctor had so often seen him before, in front of the window overlooking the now silent machinery. Whoever cared to do so might desert the falling house of Wincanton, but McGrath would remain faithful to his trust to the end.

He was incapable of a smile just now, but he gave the doctor a glance of welcome. "Sit ye doon, sir, ye look fagged."

"Do I?" Keith smiled. "That doesn't happen often, but to pass through the village, full of starving women and almost desperate men, is enough to depress any one. McGrath, can you tell me anything of this little bit of coal?" coming to the point at once.

"Eh! it's guid coal—cannel coal, too, an' that's mair than they thieves at Gorlas can turn oot! Ye're no' jesting wi' me, sir," with a sudden suspicion.

"This is no' Gorlas coal?"

"I hope not, but it may possibly be," and then he repeated all the essential parts of the history of his "cricket-ball."

"An' ye're sure 'twas the same bit piece? An' right down there! Weel, the Glasgie gentlemen didna' think o' fallin' over the edge to find a fortune, but it's just possible that ane lies there!"

"Will you come up this afternoon and see the lay of the land?"

"Aye, that I will. I'll just borrow a cairt and a powny, for I doot my auld legs wouldna' carry me that far. When will ye be ready, sir?"

"I must see little Jock Armstrong first, and then run up to Mr. Wincanton. Will you wait for me at the bottom of the hill by the avenue gate? I will try not to keep you waiting."

But in spite of his good resolutions Keith did keep the old man waiting, and by his own deliberate action, and thereby arose much trouble. He visited his little patient, stopped for a moment at the post-office to see if there were any letters for him, and received one that made the blood rush to his face, and sent him up the steep hill to Glensheen House with long, swinging strides. He found Stella, with a pale face and heavy eyes, in her father's room, and ascertained that she had not been out-of-doors for several days. Whereupon,

with a renewal of the old, merry tones that she had not heard for months, he ordered her to take a walk, volunteered to remain with her father during her absence, and fixed the avenue gate as the minimum distance permissible for her constitutional, sending a message to McGrath to explain his delay.

“By which means I shall make sure that you obey my orders honestly.”

His solicitude was probably not displeasing, and she gave in at last, and set off with a brave little smile, and a little wondering dread in her heart as to what she would have done through this terrible winter if he had consulted the dictates of prudence—and her own—and sought a practice in some more promising spot than Glensheen.

She found McGrath at the gate, awaiting the doctor with admirable patience.

“Hoo’s th’ laird the day, Missie?” he cried, as she approached, using the old familiar name that he had adopted on her first visit to Glensheen as a little child, and retained ever since.

“No better, McGrath; scarcely conscious, and very weak,” she said sadly.

“Dinna greet, Missie, he’ll soon be right again if we can bring him guid news.”

“But will there ever be good news, McGrath?” she asked wistfully.

“Aye, I trust so. Did the doctor no’ tell you o’ the new idea?”

“No—what is it?” without much hope in her voice.

He told her of the bit of coal that Keith had picked up.

"But that proves nothing," in great disappointment. "You can pick up bits of coal all over the village, and even on the beach."

"Aye, but no' high up on the hills. Besides, the Government gentleman thought weel of it!" he added incautiously.

"The Inspector who was to inquire into the cause of the accident?" she cried breathlessly. "What does he say about the poor old mine?"

McGrath would have willingly bitten out his tongue if by so doing he could have withdrawn his words.

"Eh? The Inspector—oh! he'll make a long report in writing," he said evasively.

"Yes, but he told you something—don't deceive me, McGrath, I shall only ask Dr. Thorold."

"He wad never have telled ye at a'," the old man said shamefacedly.

"Then it *is* bad news! McGrath, are we ruined?"

"Not if we can find th' new mine," very stolidly.

"I have no hope of *that*! Oh! McGrath, what shall we do?"

"Th' auld *beast* of a pit!" he cried revengefully.

"Why need she ha' gi'en way like that, an' brought a set o' Government fules aboot oor ears! If she c'uld but ha' gone on quietly, th' doctor and I would ha' keepit things taegither for a gude while yet!"

"The doctor—Dr. Thorold?" with a sudden fear.

"What has he to do with the mine, McGrath?"

He mistook her anxiety for resentment, and although he was very fond of Stella, she was not all to him that Keith had become, and he blazed out wrathfully. "What's he to do wi' th' mine? Hasna' he keepit us going ever since last September, when he took his ain siller to keep the laird frae ruin? What's he to do wi' it? Why, he just saved it, and noo he'll lose it a'!"

"Oh!" she gasped. "What is this? It is worse even than I feared! Tell me all about it, McGrath."

"My certes—what will I ha' done?" the old man cried, suddenly realising the mischief he had wrought. "Th' doctor will just a'most murder me for what I've telled ye!"

But she forced him to tell her everything, drawing the information little by little from his unwilling lips. And then she turned on him in sudden fury.

"I'll never forgive you, McGrath—never! How could you keep this from me? Don't you know what we have done for him? His own father thinks he has gambled away the money that he gave for us, and has turned him out of his house! We have ruined his life!"

"Missie," he said quietly, "is this a' true?"

"All true! All only too true! How could you?"

"Dinna reproach me mair, Missie, for I'm just heartbroken the noo."

"I beg your pardon, McGrath. Poor McGrath!" she cried quickly. "You did it all for us, but oh! if I had only known!"

She pressed his hand and turned away, hardly know

ing what she did. This new trouble seemed worse even than her father's illness. Keith had done everything for them, had been as a son to her father, a brother—nay, more than a brother—to her, and it was on their account that all his misfortunes had come. She stumbled blindly along the avenue, seeing only one thing, hearing only one sound—his pale, angry face, and hurt, bitter voice on the night of his arrival after the quarrel with his father.

She passed up the broad stone steps and entered the hall, where she threw off her hat and jacket with an instinctive desire to relieve the feeling of oppression of which she was dimly conscious, and made her way up the staircase. She opened her father's door silently, and then stopped—arrested by the scene within. Her father lay on the bed, but no longer unconscious of what passed around him. His eyes were open and beaming with an expression of affection and pleasure, while his thin, white hand rested on the rough coat-sleeve of the man at his side. It was Keith who sat there, but there was a new, softened expression on his face, and his low, earnest words were evidently conferring relief and joy on his hearer.

She started, and the door creaked a little, causing both men to look up and see her. A hot flush rose to the young doctor's face, a bright smile crossed her father's, and a quick, significant glance passed between them. Then Keith rose, came towards her with quick, resolute steps, and took her hand. She made no resistance, felt capable of none, and let him lead her to the

window in the corridor, whence she had watched him depart on the day of the accident. Then she had stood, unconscious of fatigue, now she felt strangely weak and weary, and sank on the broad, cushioned seat, letting her hot, throbbing forehead rest against the cool glass of the window-pane.

He was choking down some strong emotion—fighting for calmness, and for a few moments he remained silent. Then he spoke quietly and gently

“Stella, did you hear what we were saying—your father and I?”

She shook her head.

“But you know what I want to say. This may be no fitting time, and yet it seems to me the best. You know that I love you, Stella—I believe and hope that you love me. Will you give me the right to shield and protect you all my life?”

“Oh! don’t——” she cried, with a gesture almost of terror. “Don’t!”

“May I not speak?” he asked tenderly “Indeed, I know that I ought not now, but nothing can be unfitting that gives your father such pleasure as does the thought of this.”

“Have you said *this* to him—told him?” she cried wildly.

“Dear, was I wrong? He was very anxious—very troubled—and he had known long ago what my hopes were. And I told him that since the night of the accident in the pit I had the certainty that you cared——”

"But you must tell him—it is all wrong! It can't be! It can't be!"

"Stella! Do you *not* care?" His voice had suddenly become husky; all the glad light had died out of his eyes. "Have I been mistaken all through? I cannot believe that!" and he came towards her, and caught her cold, trembling hands, and tried to look into her face. "Listen, dear. I have a right to speak now. I had written to Dr. Grimshaw to ask him to come again and see your father, and I have had the kindest, most generous letter in answer. He did me an unconscious wrong—I can tell him now how complete a wrong—and he offers me fullest reparation. And he has shown me, too, that you were right, Stella—you always are right! My father does love me. On the day that we quarrelled he had been to Dr. Grimshaw to arrange to buy me a partnership in his practice, and now Grimshaw offers it without payment at all. I have a position and a home to offer you now"

She uttered a little moan and tried to draw her hands from his.

"What is it? Shall I go away now? Will you give me my answer another time?"

"No, no." She staggered to her feet, and held the woodwork of the window to support herself. "It can only be one answer!"

"And that——" His voice was low and expressionless; he knew what was coming.

"I cannot," she said, and sat down again. The world, and everything that was sweet and good in it,

seemed to be slipping from her grasp. She could not bear this—would he never go ?

“Stella, this cannot be true. That day—not a week ago—you let me believe that you cared for me. You let me kiss you !” with intense bitterness.

“Do not remind me of that !” she cried, putting her hands before her burning cheeks. “It is ungenerous——”

“I will not offend again,” he said curtly, and he left her without another word.

And then, as before on that other miserable day that yet seemed less miserable than this, the instinct of the doctor returned to him as he reached the top of the stairs. He went back softly to her father’s room, stood for a moment by the bed, and then went quietly towards the crouching figure on the window-seat.

“He is asleep now ; do not let him be agitated when he awakes. Dr. Grimshaw will be here at eleven o’clock to-morrow morning.”

And he left her again, and this time did not return.

She sat there for some time, forgetting everything, even her father, in this new, overwhelming rush of pain. She never questioned that she had acted rightly—it was all that she could do now not to let any further share of their troubles rest on him. She felt almost as if a curse, such as Claudian’s, lay on her family, for had they not brought ruin on those who had done the most for them—Thorold, McGrath, the toiling miners in the village below ?

At length she rose with a sigh, recalled to every-day

matters by the striking of a clock in the hall below, and went into her father's room. He was still asleep; he slept very much now. Was it significant of the exhaustion of his over-wrought mind? she wondered drearily. And then she sat down by the fire, and tried to recall calmly the events of the day, but between her and every other thought came Keith's face, stern and reproachful, as she had seen it last.

No wonder he looked reproachful. Would he ever forget and forgive the pain and humiliation he had suffered since last September? Perhaps at some future time—when recollecting gratefully her refusal to let him share any more of their misfortunes, when happily married to some one else (could *that* ever be? Yes, she must hope for it, for his sake—if she could!) when once more on friendly terms with his father—he would thank her for what she had done to-day. And then she remembered with a sudden start that she had told him nothing of the knowledge she had gained from McGrath, given him no reason at all for her refusal! McGrath might have told him by this time, it was true, but what if he had missed the old man, or if the latter had not ventured to speak of his involuntary revelation of the doctor's secret? What would Keith think of her? Would he ever think himself free to remove the cloud of suspicion between him and his father?

With anxious haste, terrified that her courage might vanish if she gave herself time for reflection, she seized paper and a pencil and wrote two notes. The first was very short:

“ McGrath will have told you why I could not do as you wish—some day you will know I was right. Try not to think too harshly of me, for I could not bear *that* after all your goodness to us.—S.”

The other was longer, but equally hasty, and she did not dare to read either when finished, but closed and directed them in haste, and gave them to Donald for immediate despatch.





CHAPTER XV

KING COAL !



KEITH walked down the avenue with scarcely more consciousness of his movements than Stella had felt when coming up under the whispering firs half an hour before. He started at the sight of McGrath in the little cart ; he had altogether forgotten the old man, and advanced towards him with a murmured apology, too much preoccupied to notice the other's agitation.

And McGrath, while Keith was taking his seat, and long after they had started over the hilly road towards the glen, was revolving in his mind how to ask the doctor's pardon for his indiscretion. Once or twice he cleared his throat to speak, but the young man sat with the same stern, immovable face, paying no attention to the manager's movements, and the words died away on the old man's tongue. Evidently he

could not be forgiven, what then was the use of speaking at all?

At length Keith roused himself from his reverie, and looked ahead. "You won't get the cart much further, and this rowan stump is the last attempt at a tree between us and our destination. We had better get out here, tie up the pony, and walk on."

"As you like, sir," McGrath said humbly, with a profound feeling of gratitude in his heart for the doctor's kindness in speaking to him at all.

They walked on together almost in silence until they reached the steps of the little terrace, and here the old man's rheumatic joints gave signs that he needed help. But when they stood together on the ledge, McGrath dropped on his knees, and eagerly scanned the slope with eyes still bright as steel. Keith told him all that he could remember of the nature of the cliff and soil below, and then stood silently gazing at the weird scene before him.

Despite the gloom, it possessed a certain beauty of its own that accorded well with Keith's present feelings—a sombre strength of loneliness; but for all that, with the recollection of his previous visits here, and the hopes that then had run like a tiny golden thread through all the darkness of past days, he could only now wish that he need never see this spot again.

"Well, McGrath?" he said impatiently.

"I'm feared to hope, sir," the old man said tremulously, "but it's just possible!"

The words were vague enough, but there was no

need to ask for an explanation. And with a little savage exultation, for which he was somewhat ashamed, the young doctor reflected that henceforth the romance of the hill would be gone—it could never look the same again to him—for to-morrow it would resound to the unaccustomed clang of pick and shovel.

“You’ll start proceedings at once?” he asked sharply.

“I w’ad the night if ’twere possible,” was the reply, and then with a deep sigh the old man rose to his feet, and prepared to start again.

“You won’t forget the spot?”

“Is it likely?”

“No,” said the doctor briefly—it was not likely.

He asked a few questions about the operations to be conducted, and the probable length of time before any final decision could be arrived at.

“I’ll ha’ the men at work by break o’ day. We’ll send them down the cliff by ropes, an’ try a big blasting, an’ then,” with a deep sigh of mingled fear and hope, “maybe we’ll be able to tell at once—maybe we’ll ha’ to try a dizin places first!”

“Send me the first information,” said the doctor quietly. “Don’t let some village lad rush up to the House with some startling yarn.”

“Ye may depend on me,” the old man said earnestly, “although, no doot, ye think I’m no’ to be depended on noo!”

“Why not?” asked Keith kindly, struck by the emotion in his companion’s voice.

“Because I telled Missie—Miss Wincanton—what ye desired me to keep secret,” the confession came out with a rush.

“Have you told her?” Keith asked indifferently. The question of the thousand pounds and his father’s suspicions had been forgotten in his new trouble, and he supposed that the manager merely referred to the hope of discovering another mine.

“Aye, she drew it frae me this afternune. I meant to tell ye, but I feared to,” with much contrition.

“Well, never mind—she must have known sooner or later. I hope she won’t tell her father.”

“He’s ta’en it coolly enow,” thought the old man. “I’m sair vexed, sir, that I should ha’ done it. I scarce kenned hoo to tell ye!”

“Am I so unapproachable?” said Keith, smiling rather bitterly. “Don’t worry about it, McGrath. Good evening, and good luck!”

“There’s a note for you from the House, old fellow,” said Kenneth, as he entered the little sitting-room at the cottage. “Donald brought it down, and carried Thekla off,” in a tone of injury.

“Why don’t you hop about after her, then?” Keith said, not very amiably. “You could if you liked.”

“What’s upset the doctor? Can’t you find any coal?”

“Yes; McGrath think’s there’s a chance—they’ll start digging to-morrow.”

“Hurrah! Good luck to them! I’ll go and assist. Thekla must borrow the pony carriage and trundle me up there.”

“She’ll probably upset you—not that you would mind that. It would give you an excuse to sit there and let her wait on you a little longer.”

“There’s more than coal—or the want of it—on your mind this evening, my friend,” thought Kenneth, as the doctor took up his little note with a great show of indifference, and retreated to the “fortune-box,” as Jack always called the consulting-room.

But when he had read the few lines scrawled by Stella’s pencil he sat down, laid it before him, and stared at it with a face that grew sterner, harder, and more cold every minute. Was this, then, why Stella had refused him? McGrath had told her of the new mine. With a girl’s impulsive hopefulness she must have indulged in rosy dreams of renewed wealth and increased importance, and the young doctor, even with his prospective London practice, could not give her the position she sought to obtain. Then he started up with an angry exclamation—Stella, his star, her father’s gentle, patient, nurse; Thekla’s kind, high-spirited friend; could she be animated by such miserable mercenary thoughts? It was impossible. And yet—“McGrath will have told you why I could not do as you wish”—there were her own words. And McGrath’s blundering confession had shown him the mean, pitiful motive of her action, and he crushed up her note with an angry imprecation and flung it into the empty fireplace.

And then, tired as he was, he went out and walked with quick, impatient steps right up and over the windy,

desolate hills, until he found himself at the spot where he had made those useless resolutions, where he had thought so tenderly of his little unhappy love watching by her father's bedside, and where he had vowed never to come again if he could help it. He laughed aloud at his weakness, at hers, at all the world, and returned home in the gathering darkness, to put together the notes he had made on the various phases of her father's illness to show Dr. Grimshaw on the morrow.

The kindly, fussy little doctor arrived in due time. Keith had driven to the nearest railway station, ten miles away, to meet him, and after some hasty refreshment at the cottage they drove up the steep avenue towards Glensheen House.

"You are not hopeful about your friend?" the elder man said, after reading the notes and hearing Keith's opinion.

"No, I am afraid there is nothing to hope. I believe, if he has no fresh trouble, he may linger a short time—that is all."

"My dear boy, you are depressed yourself—about this quarrel with your father, perhaps, and of that we must talk by and by. Are you sure that your depression has not led you to take too unfavourable a view of the case?"

"If I could but think so!" cried Keith, with a quick flush on his face.

"Ah!" the little man smiled. "When you are my age you won't take such a personal interest in your patients—even when they have pretty daughters."

Keith winced. "Ho, ho!" said his friend to himself. "Touched a raw spot, have I? Young lady's friends don't think much of a village doctor perhaps. I must talk to Sir Alexander—he must listen to me, as I began the mischief. I say, Thorold, I want to tell you, you know, I am awfully sorry to think that I had made a row between you and your father. Boys will be boys, and you are young enough in spite of your staid looks. I can't think what made me such a fool as to tell him I had seen you at Homburg, and I *was* upset when I found out what a dust I had raised."

"Does he talk slang to my father, I wonder?" Keith thought, with an odd, irrepressible little smile. "Don't worry any more about it," he continued aloud. "It was quite a minor feature in the row. But I ought to tell you that it wasn't I whom you met at Homburg, it was——"

"That fellow!" shouted the little doctor suddenly. "So it was! Who in the world is he?"

Keith looked round, following the direction of his companion's finger, and then wondered that he had not done so before, for close behind them came the pony carriage, with Jack's old pony careering along at a rate previously unattainable by her, the little trap rocking and reeling, and Thekla, clinging to the seat indeed; but urging on Kenneth, who stood up, swaying about in an alarming manner, pressing the little animal along with whip, rein, and voice.

"Stop, stop!" gasped Thekla. "We shall be killed if you don't!"

“What’s this?” asked Keith angrily, as Kenneth drew up.

“Hurrah!” he cried. “Told you so! I’m going to take all the credit for the discovery. McGrath has found the best bed of coal in the county! It has cured my leg! Long live King Coal!”

“Will this save dear old Mr. Wincanton’s life, Keith?” asked Thekla, with wistful eyes glistening with tears.

“I don’t know,” said Keith, stupidly. He was bewildered—all that he could remember at the present moment was the little note crumpled up in his fireplace, with the two sentences which he could never forget—“McGrath will tell you why I could not do as you wish—some day you will know I was right.”

And while he was frigidly shaking hands with Stella, while he watched her greeting Dr. Grimshaw, these words ran through his brain with maddening repetition. He followed her quietly up the stairs, his face set and hard, but as they reached her father’s door he detained her for one moment to say, with cold, cutting sarcasm, “I wished to tell you—I know *now* that you were right!”

She made a little involuntary movement as if to ward off a blow, and her face became a trifle whiter, but she said nothing, and led the way into her father’s room with perfect outward composure.

Dr. Grimshaw’s examination of his patient was long, full, and exhaustive, and then he turned to the young doctor with a bright smile of congratulation.

"You were a little too anxious, my dear boy—a little too anxious. I see no reason why Mr. Wincanton should not live many years to enjoy the good news you have brought him."

Stella gave a little choking sob, and even Keith was incapable of speech, but Mr. Wincanton received the information very quietly.

"I hardly care which way it goes now, Doctor. Since yesterday," with a restful, happy glance at Keith, "I have been quite content to go."

"Oh, nonsense!" said the little doctor, rubbing his hands. "Life is sweet to most folk, especially when——Come, Thorold, you may as well bring out young Jehu's good news."

"Is it all right?" asked Mr. Wincanton, gently, with a glance that included Stella this time.

Keith and Stella both knew well what he meant, and the girl felt almost faint with apprehension of the effect of the information he must receive. She understood so fully now. Her father's grief and anxiety had been for her and Jack, not for himself, and he had been content to leave them in Keith's hands. What could they say now?

But the young doctor had recovered his composure, and resolved to wilfully misunderstand his old friend. "It's all right now," he said cheerfully. "You have had so much trouble that you can easily bear a little joy. My cousin had just come up to tell us that McGrath has discovered a bed of extremely good coal."

“Where? How? This is good news indeed. I shall not leave my children penniless, Thorold.”

“No, indeed,” and Keith’s eyes spoke his silent congratulation.

“Where was it found?” he asked again, and Keith had to tell him every particular.”

“Then it is your work?” Mr. Wincanton said softly. “You bring us all our good fortune, my dear boy.”

Keith turned away to see Stella leaving the room in tears.





CHAPTER XVI.

SIR ALEXANDER'S APOLOGY.



VERY much to Keith's relief Dr. Grimshaw announced his intention of remaining a few days at Glensheen, to try the effect of his remedies on Mr. Wincanton. So long as the elder doctor was there it was not necessary for Keith to go every day up to the House, and the presence of a third person in the room prevented the confidential conversation which now the young doctor would give anything to avoid.

But he had little idea of the mental torture which was being inflicted on Stella. Full of his idea that nothing but want of means divided his young friend from Mr. Wincanton's pretty daughter, Dr. Grimshaw descanted in season and out of season on Keith's skill and cleverness, the certainty of his success in his profession, the very fair income he would enjoy if he accepted the partnership offered him by the speaker, and the conviction of the latter that sooner or later Sir

Alexander Thorold, Knight, Extra Physician to Her Majesty and half a dozen other crowned and uncrowned potentates, would come grovelling at his son's feet to ask his pardon for such cruel treatment as he had received at his father's hands. As Stella had never seen Sir Alexander she was then unable to appreciate the exquisite delight felt by his old colleague in picturing that gentleman grovelling at any one's feet. But Kenneth, when Thekla retailed the conversation for his benefit, declared that Dr. Grimshaw's idea was the most enchanting romance of which he had ever heard, and offered generously to give his ancestral halls to any one who would afford him the opportunity of witnessing his stately kinsman's degradation.

"Oh! Ken," said Thekla reproachfully, "you, who say that I do not think of my father with proper affection and respect!"

"I never said so."

"You thought it, then."

Kenneth groaned. "If you mean to take me to task because my noble thoughts are not quite in accordance with my frivolous words, what a life I shall lead by and by!"

"You are horrid, Kenneth! Now, listen; I want to talk seriously"

"You have my most serious attention."

"Then what is the matter with Keith?"

"My dear, I am not a doctor. Go and ask him. There he goes into the Armstrong pigstye—no, I mean

cottage — with a face sterner than Sir Alexander's own."

"That is just what worries me, Ken. He looks so hard and stern, just as father did after his quarrel with Keith."

"They have not been quarrelling again?"

"How could they? By the way, we have had no answer to my—or rather your—letter to father. He must have been annoyed."

"If so, I am glad he has kept his annoyance locked up in his own breast."

"So am I," with a little gasp of terrified recollection.

"You found the way of the peacemaker hard last time, little woman?" he said tenderly. "Don't worry about old Keith. He takes life too seriously, that is all."

"So does Stella," with a sigh.

"What made you think of her?" smiling.

"Because one does think of them together, always. And yet I am sure they have quarrelled—or something like it—now"

"Your mind seems set on quarrels. By Jove! Thekla—whom have we here? Sir Alexander himself, by all that is wonderful!"

"No! Yes, it is. Kenneth, he is looking for the house."

"Well, you needn't tremble yet. It will be some time before he brings himself to believe that *his* son could live *here*!"

"Oh! don't, Ken! I shall laugh when he comes in——"

"The best thing you can do. When once you begin to realise that Sir Alexander Thorold is only a man instead of something between an ogre and a demi-god—— Hullo! here he is. You must open the door, Thekla. If he caught sight of that grimy retainer of Keith's he would faint dead away!"

"Can you tell me——" began Sir Alexander as the door opened. "Thekla, is that you? Where shall I find Keith!"

"He—he lives here—he's out now."

"He lives *here*!" The accent nearly caused the invisible auditor to choke.

"Yes. Will you come in, father? I—I haven't said how-do-you-do yet."

"It would be a pity to forget that," very grimly, but he bent down and kissed her kindly "I have to thank you, my dear, for your letter; it gave me great pleasure."

"Hurrah!" muttered Kenneth, and Thekla heard him and trembled.

"Kenneth is here, father," she said meekly.

"Ha! I am to give my blessing in the conventional manner, I suppose. Well," laying his hands with real kindness on her shoulders, "I hope you may be as happy as your mother and I were."

"Thank you, father," very earnestly.

"I hope my wife won't look quite so melancholy as I have seen my poor little aunt," murmured Kenneth to himself. "And yet somehow she loved that stiff old poker, and so does his son." And then he had to greet

his future father-in-law, and thank him with much formality for his kindness in allowing him to steal his only daughter.

"I think, Thekla," he said presently, "that if you would give me your arm, we might hobble down the street and send Keith up to his father."

"Thank you," said Sir Alexander, with a quick, grateful glance.

Thekla breathed more freely when the door was shut behind them.

"What can he have come for, Kenneth? It can't be only your letter."

"My dear child, that letter is going to be referred to pretty constantly in the next few days, and it may eventually take a place of honour among the family archives, so kindly remember, once for all, it is *your* letter, not mine, and I disclaim all connection with it."

"Well, father said it was a very nice one," said Thekla contentedly, "and he never said that about one of mine before."

Kenneth laughed. "Now don't spoil my next little plan," he said quickly, as they reached the door of the Armstrongs' hovel. "We will spring Sir Alexander on Keith as a surprise. It isn't fair to keep all the surprises to ourselves."

"Poor Keith!" said his sister, with much sympathy. "Don't you think you ought to go with him, Ken? It couldn't be pleasant to face father alone."

Kenneth looked at her gravely, and took her hand in his. Perhaps he had never realised before how real was

her fear of her own father. "I am glad you belong to me now, my little Thekla," he said softly. "Don't you know, dear, that Keith loves him?"

The appearance of Keith himself stopped further discussion, and Kenneth quickly composed his countenance.

"There's some one wanting you up at the cottage, old fellow, so Thekla and I cleared out."

"Waiting for me? Who is it?"

"I'm not a walking directory of your patients," returned Kenneth, with perfect coolness.

"A patient? All right. I'll go at once. Thekla, could you go in and talk to that little fellow for a few minutes? His back is very bad, and he misses Stel—Miss Wincanton's visits."

Kenneth made a face. "This is the fellow who loathed sick people," he muttered. "All right, old fellow; we'll both go in, if we die of typhoid fever afterwards. May we make the patient laugh?"

"Do anything you like, short of beating him. His grandmother does that," replied the doctor, walking quickly up the street, but stopping half-way to speak to a woman with a sickly infant in her arms, all unconscious of the jealous eyes watching him from behind his own curtain.

He opened the door and came into the dark little room, unable at first to distinguish the tall figure by the window, then he cried, with glad surprise, "Father!" and came forward with his hand outstretched.

The elder man took it in both of his, and stood for a moment in silence. Then he said with a quiet restraint that Keith recognised and sympathised with, "You don't hesitate to give me your hand?"

"No," said Keith proudly, "because you would not come to me if you still thought me a liar."

"You misunderstood me," his father said gravely; "knowing that my suspicions were unjust, and altogether unworthy of you and me, will you yet give me your hand? Will you forgive me?"

"Father!" There was a distinct sob in Keith's throat, and it told the father what pain his suspicions had caused his son. "You know——"

"Yes, at last; and I have come to ask your pardon——"

"Don't!" cried Keith. "If it comes to asking pardons, I shall have to admit that I was very proud and obstinate, and we Thorolds don't like admitting ourselves in the wrong. How did you find out, father?"

"I have doubted that I was wrong for many months," Sir Alexander said sadly, "and perhaps if I had realised what you were going through," his glance embraced not only his son's face, but also the mean little room with its uncarpeted floor and meagre furniture, "I would have buried my pride, and told you so long ago. But it was Miss Wincanton's letter that brought me here to-day."

"Miss Wincanton's letter!"

"Yes. Did not you know she had written? Ought I to show it to you?"

“ Please,” there was a wealth of entreaty in that one word.

His father took it from his pocket and handed it to Keith. It was the pencilled note written on the same evening as the one to himself that had caused so much unconscious mischief, and he read this hasty, agitated scrawl with much amazement:—

“ SIR,—My name will not be unknown to you as the daughter of your son’s friend, and I must ask you to pardon the liberty I may be taking in writing to you. But my father is very ill, and I have been rendered so unhappy by discovering that *we* have caused the trouble between you and Dr. Thorold, that I cannot wait until my father recovers sufficiently to write to you. At present he knows nothing of this, but I have learnt to-day that the money which you suspected your son of losing in gambling was spent for us, to keep us from ruin last autumn, and for our sakes he has kept the secret. I implore you to set the matter right at once, and thus relieve me of a little of the pain I now have to bear.

STELLA WINCANTON.”

Keith’s face had become very pale as he read this letter, but he handed it back to his father in silence.

“ Is it true ? ” Sir Alexander asked quietly.

“ Yes. How can she have found it out ? ”

“ How cruelly I have misjudged you ! ”

“ You would not, if I had not been so obstinate,” Keith returned absently. “ Is it possible that I have

misjudged her far more cruelly?" he cried, with a sudden burst of emotion.

"My dear boy, what is this?"

"Stella—Miss Wincanton—I asked her to marry me, and she refused—the day she wrote that. And—and I believed it to be on account of the new mine, and perhaps it was simply because of *that!*" pointing to the letter.

"My dear boy, you bewilder me," Sir Alexander said, not unnaturally. "Would you mind explaining a little more lucidly?"

Keith walked up and down the room, pouring out an explanation that was certainly not lucid, but in time Sir Alexander understood.

"I see, I see," he said at last. "Sit down and compose yourself, my boy, we must think this over," and he took up his hat and gloves.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Miss Wincanton."

"What for?"

"To thank her for her letter," returned Sir Alexander, equably.

Stella was just pouring out Dr. Grimshaw's tea when she was informed that a gentleman wanted to see her. She looked at the little doctor, who nodded his head. They had become very intimate during the last few days, while Jack revered him only less than his first friend, Keith.

"All right, my dear. It may be some one to tell you of a gold mine this time. I will take my own tea

and superintend Jack's, by which means I shall have as much sugar and cream as I want, and he shall have as much as I think good for him."

She crossed the hall to the library. There stood a very tall, grave man, whom she had never seen before, but the likeness told her who he was, and a bright colour rushed over her face.

"Sir Alexander Thorold?"

"And you are Miss Wincanton? I had almost called you Stella. You are a very brave girl and a beautiful one!" and he took her hand with a warmth for which she was quite unprepared. "I can quite understand why my son and daughter love you."

"Sir Alexander!"

He looked at her with kindly approval. "It is quite true, and there is seldom any harm in speaking the truth. And that reminds me that I have to thank you for writing to me, and so frankly proving my mistake."

"You have seen Dr. Thorold?" she said quickly. "And it is all right! Oh! I am so glad."

"So am I," he said, with much emotion. "I cannot tell you what pain our misunderstanding has caused me."

"I know," she said softly. "I know how it has pained your son. Is he happy now?"

"You must ask him that yourself."

"No," she said sadly, "I could not ask him now."

"Miss Wincanton," he said suddenly, "why did you refuse my boy? I believe you love him."

She covered her face with her hands and trembled violently.

“Could I do otherwise? Look at the trouble we have brought on him?” she whispered.

“And you propose to remedy it by bringing more?”

“No, no—I want to avoid that!”

“By refusing him his heart’s desire?”

In that moment Stella understood why Keith loved his father. “Oh! tell me,” she cried, “what I must do.”

“Get your hat and jacket, and come straight down to Keith’s—abode (I can’t call it a house), and tell him what your eyes have just told me.”

“I cannot.”

“I think you can. You must pardon my interference, my dear, but I want to see my boy happy. He is not happy now, Stella. May I call you Stella?”

“Of course,” her eyes glistened with tears.

“Will you come?”

“If you wish it.”

She was very silent as they walked down the avenue and through the village, and he thought that she was still trembling. Outside the cottage she stopped suddenly and drew back.

“I can’t!” she said. “What will he think?”

“That you have set his happiness before your pride, my dear.”

He opened the door and walked in first, leaving her in the tiny hall. Keith was not in the sitting-room, and Sir Alexander pushed back the curtain and saw him in the little consulting-room, sitting before the table in an attitude of deep dejection, with a scrap of

crumpled paper in his hand. He did not hear his father's step, and the elder man silently withdrew, and with an amused smile returned to the hall.

"Come in, Stella," he said, taking her hand in his, and leading her through the outer room. Then he lifted the curtain again, and gave a dry little cough.

"Keith—I have brought you—your wife!"

And then he discreetly withdrew.

After what he considered a sufficient interval he was about to venture in again, when he was checked by a soft, happy voice, which he scarcely recognised under these new conditions.

"Keith, I must tell you—I said you were ungenerous to speak of it, and I know that hurt you—but when you kissed me—that night of the accident—I—I—kissed you too!"

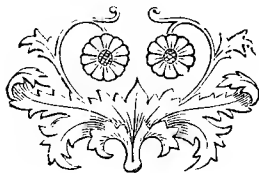
And Sir Alexander dropped the curtain in great haste.

The two London doctors had completed a satisfactory examination of Mr. Wincanton, giving him hopes of speedy recovery in plain English, and revenging themselves by discussing his ailments in densest technicalities. But Dr. Grimshaw saw that something more was coming—Sir Alexander was too palpably triumphant for mere pleasure in another man's cures, even though his son had had a fair share of the success gained. At last it came.

"Grimshaw, you won't get your new partner, you know."

“ Eh ! what ? What do you mean ? ”

“ He is otherwise engaged. I am going to have a new plate put up—‘ Sir Alexander Thorold and Dr. Thorold,’ that is all ! ”



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